

The Influence of Social Media Use on Male College Students' Gender Identity
and Gendered Performance

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Dedication

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Abstract

To better understand the influence of social media use on male college students' gender identity and male gendered performance, this research examined existing research on digital identity and social networking sites, male gender identity development, college student development theory, and the effects of living arrangements on college students. Using constructivist grounded theory, this study was guided by the following research question: *How does the influence of social media use on male college students' gender identity and gendered performance affect first-year students and graduating seniors?* A total of 31 students at a private, liberal arts institution in the Midwestern United States participated in the study. Methods included individual interviews, synchronous ethnographic digital observations, and focus groups.

The theory that emerged from this study was developed through analysis of students' experiences and is a representation of the intersection and convergence of male gender identity development and digital identity development. Participants described changes that occur between the first year of college and the final year of college, both in the way that they define masculinity and the way that they describe their use social media. A shift occurs throughout time spent in college, evolving from pre-college expectations and assumptions to the intentional alignment of in-person and online values. Formative experiences and opportunities in college – including both in-classroom and out-of-classroom – provided the impetus for change that allowed the participants to better understand their identities and contexts and begin to understand how they engage with both the physical and digital world as men.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The mask that college men wear to perform their gender identity has become increasingly more complex with the rise of the influence of social media. The college experience affects personal development in many ways, the central piece being the development, recognition and presentation of self-identity. Erikson (1968) noted that “at one time [identity] seemed to refer to a conscious sense of individual uniqueness, at another to an unconscious striving for a continuity of experience, and at a third, as a solidarity with a group’s ideals” (p. 208). The college setting provides an opportunity for students to develop, formulate and contemplate identity and how the formation of identity allows for the establishment of both an individual presence and an understanding of where one fits in groups.

The changing landscape of adolescent development in the United States has had an effect on the college experience. As of 2013, 90 percent of college students owned laptops, 80 percent owned smart phones, and 50 percent owned tablets (Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013). Not only are college students using more mobile technology, they are using it to connect. As evidenced by data shared by the Pew Internet Resource Center (2015, 2016), social networking site use is at 89-percent for individuals aged 18-28 and is nearly ubiquitous among those attending college. Research has indicated that students enter college having spent less time socializing as teens and have increased interactions through online social networks and are less likely to have tangible relationships (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Suchard, & Hurtado, 2014). Terms like “social media,” “Web 2.0,” and “social networking sites (SNSs)” are often used

interchangeably, but those terms all essentially refer to social and digital technologies designed for interaction, engagement, and content creation. “Social media” and “SNS” will be used interchangeably throughout this study.

While masculinity and “being a man” are defined in many ways – and recognizing that gender is defined on a spectrum rather than simply “male” or “female” – the lens through which masculinity is defined in this paper is through traditional gender assumptions and traits of cisgender men. Steinmetz (2014) defined cisgender as a term that serves as the counter to *transgendered*, much the way *homosexual* is the term that serves as a counter binary term for *heterosexual*. The prefix *cis-* is Latin for “on this side of,” while *trans-* means “on the other side of,” therefore making *cisgender* a term describing a person who is not transgender. While the terms “male” and “female” are not inclusive of all definitions on the gender spectrum, the review of literature for the purposes of this paper will focus on definitions based on the male/female binary. A majority of the United States population self-reports as cisgender – The Williams Institute (2011) reported that 0.3 percent of the population was transgendered – and this research aims to discuss the experience of men and gendered performance through traditional, stereotypical definitions of masculinity.

The dramatic rise in social networking use and the complicated ways that society has defined masculinity today pose real challenges to individual student development. As a result, student affairs professionals have a more challenging task in assisting college men through their development and their college experience. How do college men define themselves today? What are the ways that social media and social networking influence college men? This study aims to explore the connection between social networking use

and male college student identity development and provide insight to student affairs practitioners as they work to meet the needs of college men in the 21st century.

Real Stories of College Men

Young men often understand their college experiences through the lens of masculinity in different ways at different times during their undergraduate career. Brief introductions of two college males who represent two distinct stages of identity development illustrate the influence that a perception of masculinity and manhood may have on a cisgender young man's experience. While the following descriptions are not portrayals of participants in this particular research, they are illustrative examples of how typical college men approach social media use.

Andrew is a first-year student at a small, residential, liberal arts institution in the Midwestern United States. A high-performing student in high school, Andrew is adjusting to life at college. He maintains strong connections to high school friends through social media – getting caught up on what friends are doing at other institutions and back home, and keeping strong connections with them while trying to make new friends in college. Andrew was very comfortable with what it meant to be a boy in high school and he fit all of the stereotypes well – analytical, athletic, tough-guy exterior but sensitive at his core, but Andrew is having trouble understanding what it means to be a man in college. His friends talk openly and harshly about women and sexual activity, friendship circles tend to form and evolve around access to alcohol, weekends are filled with social gatherings, and his new friends demonstrate their manliness by posting pictures of drinking parties and crude comments about females on social media. Most of

his friends live on his residence hall floor and are primarily male. Andrew is not sure of what to make of his role as a college man; while he is no longer the “top dog” or alpha male that he was in high school, he is realizing that portrayals of masculinity on campus are very different than what he expected and is having difficulty reconciling who he thinks he is in the context of social expectations.

Logan is a college senior at the same small, residential institution as Andrew. Logan has been attending this college in the Midwestern United States for three years and has well-established academic plans and social circles. Similar to Andrew, Logan developed his sense of what it meant to be a college man through observing and imitating others in his social groups. Logan has many good friends at college, and while he still uses social media to stay connected to friends from high school, his primary focus is his new social circle. While less likely to post pictures of drinking or to make sexually objectifying comments on social media, Logan is more likely to use his social networking sites to network and to post pictures from campus events and personal trips. Occasional online check-ins with friends from his past are now often after-thoughts to staying connected to friends on campus. Logan has close male and female friends. His academic major is one which consists of a majority female population, and life in his residence hall has provided opportunities to engage in conversations and programming about issues of gender, identity and understanding multiple perspectives. While Logan still engages in sophomoric behavior with male friends at times, he has a stronger sense of responsibility to others and to making decisions that will positively affect his future. While Logan is still unsure of how “being a man” will play out after college, he has a strong understanding of the social expectations of men at his institution – and while it often

creates dissonance, he has been socialized to the expectation and plays his role on campus.

Andrew and Logan represent two distinct characterizations of the college male at different points of time in their college experience. While these are not stories of men who participated in the research for this dissertation, the descriptions of Andrew and Logan represent how college men think about their identities. College men face a challenging task when developing a sense of who they are and what it means to be a man during their undergraduate experience. The definition of “being male” is not a simple idea, and the definition is one that is malleable and ever-changing depending on social and societal influence. Harris and Struve (2009) said that “We view masculinity as a socially constructed identity that encompasses the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are culturally associated with men” (p. 3). So how do Andrew, a first-year male student, and Logan, a senior male student, come to terms with understanding their gender identity while in college? If masculinity is a socially constructed identity, what role does the college experience play in allowing male students to develop and construct their own understanding of who they are as men?

Defining Masculinity

Goffman (1976) stated that gender identity and gender roles are a significant part of everyday life and are actually constituted through social interaction. Goffman (1976) analyzed over 500 commercialized images of gendered depictions to demonstrate how culture expects to visualize how men and women should behave. As a result of the study, Goffman argued that assumptions and expectations based on gender make statements

about social hierarchy and illustrate understandings of power, value, and worth. According to Rose, et al., (2012), “Gender shapes how people make sense of themselves and their social relationships” (p. 589). So it is through interactions and relationships that individuals formulate a sense of gender identity, but Wood (2009) noted that what gender means and how it is defined depends heavily on cultural values and practices, “a culture’s definitions of masculinity and femininity shape expectations about how individual men and women should communicate” (p. 20).

Gender performativity and the notion that one performs who he or she is for others is complex. Butler (1990) acknowledged the assumption that to perform identity, it is assumed that gender is socially constructed. West and Zimmerman (1987) proposed a theory called “doing gender” as a way to describe performativity. Denker (2009) noted that “Doing gender is important as an analytic lens because it allows individuals to examine the interactions that they have with others and to look at the words and actions that they use daily to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their gender (p. 103). Doing and performing have unique implications for individual development. According to Kelan (2009), doing gender is rooted in sociology, the belief that gender is constructed socially through interactions with others; whereas performativity is rooted in psychology because it focuses on the individual, internal process of identity formation from discourses and subject positions, thus resulting in reiterative performances of gender. Therefore, gender performance results in furthering the socially constructed understanding of how that gender should interact with the world. In other words, according to Lepkowski (2014), “performativity is a cyclical process that produces social norms rather than simply reflecting them” (p. 13). Thus, socially constructed notions of

gender roles and identity begets gender performance, and gender performance in turn furthers gender norms and stereotypes.

Just as masculinity is a performed manifestation of male gender identity, social media identity is a performed version of identity. Goffman (1959) wrote about the presentation of self in everyday life and the act of performing one's identity, which is often seen with male gender identity development and masculine presentation.

Presenting an identity and requesting that observers believe that to be the true identity of the individual is an act of performance "for the benefit of other people" (Goffman, 1959, p. 17). In fact, Goffman (1959) argued that individuals were concerned with self-presentation in all interactions, therefore impressions impact the opinions of others regardless of an individual's intentions. There are ultimately two extreme manifestations of this identity performance – one is that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act and sincerely convinced that the portrayal of character, and the other is that the individual may be cynical about his own identity portrayal but recognizes that he's "playing a character as a means to other ends" (p. 19). Burr (2002) posited that people constantly play characters to "fit in" with social norms and that gender role focuses on the collectivity of logical, behavioral, cognitive and emotional responses to social situations, which are affected by the way a man perceives himself and the way that others perceive him. Identity performance through self-presentation was once just focused on physical, face-to-face interactions, but now includes digital interactions via new technologies and social media.

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Development Model, it is vital to examine a student's "social surround" when analyzing how and why they develop

socially. The social ecosystems within which college students progress toward a personal identity are now undeniably influenced by presence on social media. Students often struggle to negotiate the relationship between the digital and physical definitions of their identity, which leads to disruption when the microsystems that Bronfenbrenner described interact. Students often create a version of themselves online that is more socially desirable and polished than the version they portray in real life. Because of the perceived need to self-present in more polished ways, the identity of college students today is much more externally oriented than identities of pre-digital students (Gardner & Davis, 2013, p. 66).

But what happens to a college male if his notion of self-presentation is at odds with the audience that is perceiving his performed masculine identity? danah boyd (2010) used the term "context collapse" to describe how a social media network like Twitter collapses multiple audiences into a single context. Marwick and boyd (2010) noted that the navigation of identities in different contexts as they collapse – and the ensuing management of self-presentation on a platform such as Twitter - can lead to inauthentic interactions and “an intrinsic conflict between self-promotion and the ability to connect with others on a deeply personal or intimate level” (p. 15). That collapsing of contexts makes it difficult for the user to understand the scope of the audience and makes it difficult to negotiate and manage interactions like one would in a face-to-face conversation. Context collapse is an idea that complicates a student’s ability to navigate identity development. Marwick and boyd (2010) wrote that individuals have a sense of audience in every mediated conversation. In a study of 181 teenage Twitter users, Marwick and boyd (2010) found that individuals wrestled with navigating multiple

audiences, balancing expectations of authenticity, and self-censorship. So whether that audience is imagined or constructed, the individual makes a decision about how to present himself/herself in a manner that he/she feels is appropriate to the context of that interaction. Through social media or through other methods of digital technology, the distribution of an individual's image or message negates an ability to negotiate a conversation as you would in a face-to-face interaction.

Goffman (1959) wrote that people are like actors who navigate “frontstage” and “backstage” areas. For example, a classroom might be a frontstage space for a student, while a candid conversation in a residence hall room might be a backstage space. The navigation of the two allows a student to understand their own identity within specific contexts through constant interactions with others. Marwick and boyd (2010) referred to this as “symbolic interactionism” and described self-presentation as collaborative. In other words, “individuals work together to uphold preferred self-images of themselves and their conversation partners, through strategies like maintaining/saving face, collectively encouraging social norms, or negotiating power differential and disagreements” (p. 123). The advent of social media and social networking altered the ways in which college students are able to present themselves to the outside world. The expansive growth of social networking sites has created multiple and varied options through which a student may present him/herself to personalized networks and a wider (perhaps unknown) audience.

There is a significant gap in the research on the influence of social media on male college identity student development and gender performance. Davis and Laker (2004) argued that college educators have not traditionally viewed male students as gendered

beings nor have they considered the establishment of healthy gender identity a developmental priority for college men. Davis and Laker (2004) argued that while formal research and theory exist relative to male identity development, overt focus has been placed on issues related to women and people of color because men's issues are "seen as implied in discussion of general student development models" (p. 48). As a result, finding proactive ways to understand how and why men identify as men and how that identity is manifest in their behavior is of importance in the analysis of the male college experience.

Edwards and Harris III (2010) studied a total of 78 men in two individual studies and found that men described their expectations of college men to include having "competitive heterosexual sex, drinking to excess, doing drugs, breaking the rules and not caring about or putting work into academics" (p. 47). The result of these attitudes were often misogynistic relationships with women, limited relationships with other men and a loss of self. In a study conducted by Sax (2008) that examined longitudinal survey data on over 10,000 women and 7,000 men attending 200 colleges and universities in the United States, men were found to skip class more frequently, to spend more time partying, drinking and watching television than their female counterparts. In addition, a study by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2007) found that males, in general, were more than 3.3 times more likely to commit crimes than females. These are troublesome characteristics when viewed through the lens of psychosocial and identity development. Male college students face challenges in developing identity and understanding the boundaries and expectations of masculinity and because the definitions of those identities

are socially-constructed, there is significant value in understanding the influences on the society – both on-campus and off-campus - that are defining their roles.

Social Media and College Men

Social media and social networking sites play a significant role in the lives of traditional-aged undergraduate college students (Pew Research Center 2012, 2014).

According to The Pew Internet and American Life Project's 2015 survey, 96 percent of adults aged 18-29 in the United States use the internet, a percentage that Perrin and Dugan (2015) claim is likely even higher for those individuals in the same demographic who attend college. According to the Pew Research Center Report on Demographics of Key Social Networking Platforms (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2014), 87 percent of adults aged 18-29-years used Facebook, 37 percent of adults in that demographic used Twitter, 53 percent used Instagram and 23 percent used LinkedIn. Researchers have examined the role that social media plays in the college experience, both academically and socially. Several studies have focused on how social media influences the academic success of college students (Selwyn, 2009; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Yu, Tian, Vogel, & Kwok, 2010; Junco, 2011; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011; Junco, 2014). Beyond academic influence, the effect social media use has on successful transitions to college and retention from the first year to sophomore year has also been studied (Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013). In addition, the significance of online identity development has been examined and suggested the significant role that digital space has in the overall development of identity

(boyd, 2007; Ellison, 2007; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Mastrodicasa & Metellus, 2013; Stoller, 2013).

Although comprehensive studies have been conducted regarding male gender identity development and the effect the college experience has on men (e.g., Edwards, 2007; Harris & Struve, 2009; Davis, 2010; Harper & Harris III, 2010), very few studies have been conducted recently enough to incorporate the growing significance of social media and social networking sites on identity development. A growing body of literature exists on digital identity development (boyd, 2007; Ellison 2007; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Stoller, 2013), the relationship between social networking site use and academic performance (Junco, 2012, 2014), and how social networking sites affect social development in college (DeAndrea, et al., 2011; Seidman, 2012). Very few of these studies are focused on men and the unique challenges faced by 21st century college males as they develop and understand their gender identity. Scholarly attention to this growing area of social research is needed.

Gender, Social Media, and Student Affairs

The student affairs profession has focused energy on conversations centered on men's development issues. NASPA coordinates the Men and Masculinities Knowledge Community, while the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) coordinates the Coalition of Men and Masculinities and the Standing Committee for Men, which bring together student affairs researchers and practitioners to discuss issues related to male college student development. Western Illinois University operates the Center for the Study of Masculinities and Men's Development, which "aims to provide quality

scholarship, advocacy, and programming that positively influences men's development in a manner congruent with gender equity and social justice" (CSMMD, 2015).

Controversy around the need for men's centers persists, however, as issues of gender equity and balancing resources long-allocated to men's needs are being shifted to the growing population of women enrolled in college today (Vendituoli, 2013).

Colleges and universities are at the center of many gender conversations today, both in the classroom and outside the classroom. Academic programs related to gender studies have grown in the last 30 years as academic research and theoretical understandings of gender roles in society have developed and changed. Co-curricular programs such as men's centers, women's centers, orientation programs, and residential life programming have also grown around the topic of gender over the past 30 years as the student affairs profession has analyzed approaches to serving all students on campus. Topics such as gender equity, the gender spectrum, and equal access are prominent topics in higher education in the 21st century, and student affairs practitioners are charged with both ground-level conversations with students and with setting policy and vision for how the role of gender influences life on campus. In addition, gender-related social behavior issues play a prominent role on today's college campuses, including an increased focus on alcohol and drug use, bias-related incidents, sexual assault, and sexual harassment.

The ASHE Higher Education Report on Social Media in Higher Education (2016) noted many of the challenges that institutions may face with the emergence of social media as a central focus of many students' lives. The report noted that "higher education administrators express concern that the ubiquity of social media... weakens students' ability to engage in meaningful personal reflection as part of the developmental process

in college” (p. 96). Challenges such as the role of anonymity, cyberbullying, racial hostility, and building and maintaining healthy relationships are all an interesting part of the equation for college administrators when understanding the role of social media. The 21st century version of incivility has found a home on social media and in the comment sections of websites, and institutions are compelled to find methods of response to this evolving area of concern.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

This study focuses on the influence that social media use has on male college students’ gender identity and gender performance. A statement of the problem is situated in both historical and current context; throughout history and particularly today, many college men struggle to understand their identity as gendered beings, and there are significant factors that contribute to a lack of persistence and completion, an influx of behavioral issues, and a general sense of confusion about the societal expectations of a college man. The current landscape of higher education includes access to a rapidly expanding digital social network for college students, and the increasing utilization of social networking sites as a connection and interaction point for men has an influence on how they perceive their masculinity and identity. Student affairs administrators charged with assisting male students with successful college experiences are often left with more questions than answers when determining best practices for assisting college men in their developmental process. This study examined how college men understand their masculinity and how they think about their social media use, and will provide a summary of implications for practice for student affairs administrators.

This research was designed to provide insight into how college men's actual behavior on social media compares to their self-described behavior on social media in an attempt to clarify how college men articulate the intersection of male gender identity and digital identity. This qualitative study examines the experiences of college men through interviews, focus groups, and digital observations to analyze students' understanding of their identities and the ways in which they use social networking sites. Specifically, this study asks: *What is the use of and influence of social media on male college students' gender identity and gendered performance for first-year students and graduating seniors?*

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of men in higher education has evolved through time, though it has long been a male-dominated culture. Dramatic shifts have occurred over the last forty years as first-time, full-time women became a majority in the college-going demographic.

According to data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), men comprised the greater percentage of entering college students until 1970. After 1970, the percentage of women increased steadily, “overtaking the percentage of men in 1976 and increasing until 2001, when women constituted about 55 percent of entering students” (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007, p. 8). By 2012, the number of young women enrolled in college immediately after high school had increased to 71 percent, but remained at 61 percent for men from 1994-2012 (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014).

Barnett (2013) asserted that men have long had a privileged presence in higher education, but a number of factors demonstrate an alarming trend in the need to better understand how and why men act as they do in college. Barnett noted that because men have social power, we are prohibited from identifying male privilege and, as a result, “[men] enjoy benefits that are unearned and unjustified” (para. 3). Have the blinders imposed by male privilege created a sense of apathy among young men considering attending college?

The noticeable change in demographics indicates that there are compounding issues that may be centered on changing gender roles and gender development.

There are four broad categories of literature that provide the foundation for the present research on male college student identity development and performance in the context of the role of social media. The first focuses on digital identity development, which is the least complete body of literature of the four examined in this paper, but is

rapidly growing as the expansion of social networking sites (SNS) changes the way college students communicate. An examination of how SNSs are used will provide insight into how and why communication has changed for students and how students negotiate digital versus in-person interaction. The second body of literature is college student development theory, which involves close examination of identity theory, cognitive-structural theory and psychosocial development theory. Undergraduate college students (particularly men) have long been the focus of research and the basis for developmental theories, and an examination of these theories will provide insight into the growth and change that occurs during the college experience, ultimately providing a view of how digital interactions are interacting typical student development. The third important body of literature is male gender identity development and masculinity. Gendered-identity development varies and this review focuses on binary gender research – the similarities and differences between the identity development of male college students and female college students. Examining gender identity development literature provides context for why men develop in different ways than women during their college experience. The final body of literature is the effect of living in residence halls on undergraduate student experience and development. The communal nature of residence hall living has an influence on college student development, and ultimately may have an influence on how men perceive relationships within their social systems.

Social Networking and Digital Identity

Technology and rapidly-changing methods of communication have greatly altered how we interact in the 21st century. Social media are one of the most visible ways that

communication has been altered in the 2000s. Junco (2014) defined social media as “applications, services, and systems that allow users to create, remix and share content” (p. 6). In addition, most social media include social networking features, allowing users to interact and communicate – to “network” – in digital space. In this section, an overview of the recent history of computer-mediated communication leading up to and including the rapid growth of social media and Social Networking Sites (SNS) is provided, followed by an introduction and brief summary of how certain specific popular SNS (including Facebook, Twitter, etc.) are used. Attention is given to the growing body of research and literature on digital identity development and how SNS use affects the development of personal identity and identity performance. Digital social networking is a rapidly growing area of focus in the world of communication. While computer-mediated communication has been an integral part of the lives of students entering college in the 21st century, the growth of computer use grew quickly beginning in the 1980s – a relatively new phenomenon in the world of higher education. Aleman and Wartman (2009) noted that the personal computer was named “Machine of the Year” by *Time* Magazine in 1982 and became a familiar element of education by the late 1980s.

Aleman and Wartman (2009) also noted that the generation of college students in the United States born between 1984 and 1989 was likely to have used the Internet before entering college, to have owned their own computers, communicated via e-mail or instant messenger, and experienced computer-mediated communication on the Internet as a part of their daily campus routine. By the late-1990s, the World Wide Web was being widely utilized by students and early Social Networking Sites (SNS), like SixDegrees.com and LiveJournal.com, were emerging (Aleman & Wartman, 2009, p. 2). This growth in

relatively easy access to SNS provide a “medium and an engine of social relations” (Aleman & Wartman, 2009, p. 20). boyd and Ellison (2008) defined SNS as web-based services that allow individuals to “construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211), therefore building constructed networks of digital friends.

While digital communication via the Internet had existed for years, the creation and growth of Facebook in 2004 expanded the understanding of the use of digital communication and allowed for the development of expansive SNS that have seen rapid growth in in the past decade and now demand attention within the spectrum of student development research. DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfeld, and Fiore (2011) noted that while traditional engagement through networks was one-to-many, SNSs enable users to have peer-to-peer interactions and engage and comment on the material. Junco (2014) noted that “very little attention has been given to how social media influence student development, although these sites and services are central to the lives of our students” (p. 95).

Constructing networks of digital connections is now a vital component of the college experience for many students. In order to understand the role that social networking and digital connections play in the lives of current college students – while acknowledging that digital communications are continuously evolving and have risen to prominence in the last 10-15 years - it is important to understand the perspective of the user. Junco (2014) created a distinct delineation between “adult normative” perspective and a “youth normative” perspective when understanding how students use social

networking in comparison to how an older generation may use the same tools. Junco (2014) described the adult normative perspective as a “prescriptive and authoritarian approach to understanding youth social media use” (p. xix). Furthermore, Junco (2014) described the *adult normative* perspective includes beliefs that “social media use ‘ruins’ young people’s ability to have ‘normal’ relationships” and that it often is reinforced by “media accounts of how terrible social media are for young people” (p. xix). Junco (2014) said that the youth normative perspective “attempts to understand young people’s experiences through their viewpoint” (p. xix). To further this idea, Cabellon and Junco (2015) noted:

An *adult normative* perspective reflects an adult viewpoint, marked by a prescriptive approach, highlighted by negative beliefs, where the sole source of information is from themselves. Those who engage in the *adult normative* perspective often believe popular media’s negative portrayals of youth technology use. Conversely, a *youth normative* perspective reflects a youth-centered viewpoint, marked by an inquisitive approach, highlighted by balanced beliefs, where the primary source of information is from youth themselves (p. 53).

Junco (2014) and Cabellon and Junco (2015) suggested that the use of social media does play an important role in the lives of youth, but if one is able to adopt the *youth* normative perspective in order to understand how a young person views digital communication, we may come to see that social media use does not assign a different value to experiences, but rather just indicates that experiences are different because of social media.

In thinking more about the youth normative perspective on what connections mean in the digital age, it is important to understand what students gain from connections that are more easily attainable now through social media than have ever been before.

Siemens (2004) introduced “connectivism” as a learning theory for the digital age that aims to explain how students use technology to leverage connections to acquire and share knowledge through those connections, and his theory is particularly relevant in the age of digital connections. That knowledge gained through technological connections feeds directly into the development of one’s identity. Stephenson (1998) noted that “Experience has long been considered the best teacher of knowledge. Since we cannot experience everything, other people’s experiences, and hence other people, become the surrogate for knowledge” (p. 1). If the rise of technology toward the end of the 20th century were as vital to the creation of connections and new opportunities for knowledge as Siemens (2004) argued, the introduction of large-scale digital social networking in the last decade has likely had a much more significant influence by creating rapid, widespread growth in connections among college-aged students. Siemens (2004) compared the flow of knowledge through connections to oil in an oil pipe – and he argued that “the pipe is more important than the content within the pipe” (para. 33).

The oil pipes today are social networking sites, and students are using those sites at higher rates and more frequently than any other demographic characteristic of users. A survey for the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 89 percent of adults age 18-29 years old use social networking sites compared to 78 percent of those ages 30-49 years, and 60 percent of those age 50-64 years (Brenner & Smith, 2013). So college students, a majority of whom are in the 18-29 year old age demographic, are using social networking sites to make connections with others in greater numbers than any other age demographic. Tinto (1982) theorized in his model of student integration that students tend to be more successful in their transition to college when they maintain connections

from high school. Gray, Vitak, Easton, and Ellison (2013) reported that the use of SNS may ease a student's transition from high school to college by "providing them with informational and social support as well as a way to find and connect with other students" (p. 193). Therefore, the constructed network of digital friends encompasses both connections one maintains with friends from home and from high school, while also expand to include friends and connections in college.

Digital communication and SNS are readily available to college students today. Dahlstrom and Bichsel (2014) found that as of 2014, students had wide accessibility to and preference for mobile devices. Dahlstrom and Bichsel (2014) and the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research partnered with 213 higher education institutions in 45 states in the United States and 15 countries to research undergraduate information technology experiences and expectations. In a sample of more than 75,000 students, 90 percent of students indicated that they owned laptops, 86 percent owned smartphones (up from 76 percent in 2013), and 47 percent owned a tablet (up from 31 percent in 2013). The increased access to mobile devices means that students have the ability to be constantly connected with social media, a phenomenon that has implications for how students are spending their time – both in terms of volume of SNS use and frequency of use.

Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Suchard, and Hurtado (2014) found through large-scale research that social media use has significantly influenced the current college population. In a study of 153,015 first-time, full-time students at 227 four-year United States colleges and universities, researchers found that 27.2 percent of students spent six hours or more per week on online social networks – an increase from 18.9

percent who spent six hours or more per week in 2007. In a parallel statistic, students reported spending less time socializing with friends upon entering college. In 1987, the survey found that 37.9 percent of respondents socialized at least 16 hours per week with friends and 23.4 percent reported that they spent less than one hour per week partying. Those numbers dropped in the same survey in 2014, with just 18 percent of respondents socializing at least 16 hours per week with friends and 61.4 percent indicated that they spent less than an hour partying each week (Eagan et al., 2014, p. 11).

Due to the relatively new nature of digital social networking and SNS communication, the scope of research on the topic is narrow – most commonly defined by studies regarding use. The depth of the research in terms of meaning-making and the interplay of SNS with identity formation and research is also quite limited. Gray, Vitak, Easton, and Ellison (2013) proposed that use of the Internet, and experimentation away from parental oversight was a key aspect of identity exploration, supporting a claim by Arnett (2000) that moving away to college – and away from parents – allowed for “increased autonomy in emerging adults spurred on by changes in residence, places of employment and the formation of new circles of friends” (p. 194).

The idea of identity exploration in online spaces has spurred conversation and research regarding the term “digital identity.” Dalton and Crosby (2013) defined digital identity as the “composite of images that individuals present, share, and promote for themselves in the digital domain” (p. 1). A digital identity, therefore, is a self-presentation created through the curation of posts, pictures, comments, and interactions online. While “digital identity development” has often been used by student affairs professionals to describe how a student constructs an identity through digital means, that

particular use of the phrase confuses a process of creating an online presence (a self-presentation) with creating a sense of identity by exploring through the use of SNSs. As Brown (2016) noted, curating content that constitutes a digital presence “might *represent* an identity, and might be generated as part of identity exploration, the content itself is not developmental. One’s data does not have a psychological life... it confuses the process of developing (exploring) identity online with the process of developing (crafting) and online identity” (p. 11). Junco (2014) addressed the problematic definition by stating:

Many student affairs professionals use the term digital identity development to refer to online professional self-presentation; however, it is important to tease apart the differences between using social media as part of the exploration and development of identity and using social media to present oneself in a certain way. Labeling the latter digital identity development confounds a developmental process with a professional communication strategy (p. 257).

The use of SNS and digital spaces to explore the development of identity is an experience just starting to be examined by researchers at the start of the 21st century (boyd, 2007; Ellison 2007; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Mastrodicasa & Metellus, 2013; Stoller, 2013).

The growth of SNS and social media has included hundreds of web-based sites and smartphone applications. Among the most popular applications among teenagers are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat (Pew Research, 2015). The use of these SNS applications among teenagers (defined as age 13-17) provides insight into the most popular sites among those students entering or about to enter college. Data from Pew Research (2015) indicated that teenagers are using social media at increasingly high rates.

Types of Social Networking Sites

Social media has grown rapidly in the last decade. The number of social networking sites has increased and the function and purpose of sites has evolved and changed. There are several SNS platforms that are the most popular in terms of number of users and frequency of use. The following is an overview of four of the SNS platforms commonly used by college students.

Facebook

Created in 2004, Facebook is an SNS that allows users to create a profile, upload and share photos and videos, share status updates and send messages. Stoller (2013) stated that Facebook “changed how we interact with the Internet” (p. 14). The advent of Facebook created the opportunity for web interactions that were no longer anonymous, as most online methods of connecting had been (e.g., chat rooms, website forums, comment sections on news articles). Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected (Facebook, 2013). Users create profile pages to share information (called “status updates”) and post images about themselves, and allows for the ability to make connections (called “friends”). Facebook users also have the ability to “like” and share status updates and images posted by connections.

The popularity of Facebook as the predominant SNS is evident: there are over 1.35 billion users on the site (Dewey, 2014), and Pew Research (2014) showed that 71 percent of all adult Internet users age 18-64 use Facebook. About 84 percent of 18-29 year olds use Facebook (Pew 2014), and 90 percent of college students use Facebook (Junco, 2011). Facebook is one of the original SNS options for students and remains

popular – of the 90 percent of students who use SNS, 97 percent said they used Facebook daily (Smith & Caruso, 2010). Junco (2011) found that students checked Facebook a mean of 5.75 times per day and spent about 1 hour and 40 minutes per day on the website. Facebook has had a profound influence on the growth of SNS use, and has created a baseline for understanding how we use these websites and applications. Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, and Purcell (2011) surveyed 2,255 American adults (1,787 of whom were Internet users and, of that number, 975 were users of SNS) found that Facebook users were more trusting than others, have more close relationships, and get more social support than other people.

Twitter

Twitter is a microblogging site designed to allow users to post short, 140-character text updates (or “tweets”) to a network of others. There are over 284 million monthly users producing 500 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2015). Twitter has a directed friendship model: participants choose Twitter accounts to “follow” in their stream and they each have their own group of “followers” (Marwick and boyd, 2010, p. 116). While a user’s followers may be defined on the site, it is nearly impossible for Twitter users to account for their potential audience given the various ways people can consume and spread tweets (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 117). Twitter users communicate in conversations using the “@” symbol, which precedes a username and allows a user to be “mentioned” and brought into a conversation. Twitter also utilizes the “#” symbol (a “hashtag”) to tag posts. Those tagged posts may then be followed, creating conversations within Twitter streams.

Instagram

Instagram, created and launched in 2010 and currently owned by Facebook, is an online mobile photo- and video-sharing service that allows users to take pictures and videos and share them within Instagram or through connected applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Flickr. Instagram is used by more than 300 million people worldwide and more than 70 million photos are shared per day on average (Instagram, 2015). Duggan (2015) noted that the growth of Instagram has been noticeable, with usage rates among all online adults nearly doubling since 2012, and that women are more likely to use Instagram than men (31 percent of women versus 24 percent of men). Duggan (2015) also noted that 55 percent of internet users between the ages of 18-29 use Instagram. Users capture and share digital photos through their personal accounts. Instagram is popular for its “filters,” which allow users to create and share artistic photos. Like Twitter, Instagram users can tag photos using other usernames and/or hashtags.

Snapchat

Snapchat is a social sharing application that was created in 2011 by two undergraduates at Stanford University. The students responsible for creating the application envisioned a smartphone app for friends who wanted to socialize online with “no lasting record or repercussions” (Gillette, 2013, para. 6). Snapchat requires a username and personal identifier log-in to utilize the application. Further complicating the understanding of digital identity development via SNS is the important distinction between “anonymous” and “public” SNS platforms. Considered a personal messaging

application, over 100 million daily active users are on Snapchat and users of the app send over 700 million photos and videos per day (Snapchat, 2014). Reisinger (2015) found that 71 percent of Snapchat's active users were between the ages of 18 to 34 years. Lenhart (2015) found that 41 percent of teens between the ages of 13-17 were using Snapchat, which indicates that the growing trend of users has started young and those students will soon be on college campuses having had experience using the app.

The wide variety of SNSs provides college students an opportunity to experiment with various types of digital communication, shaping their user experience to match peers or interact with certain segments of the campus population. But, without a doubt, college students are using SNSs to communicate – to share a common experience, to share details of their lives, to share information and ideas – and the use of these tools is changing how students define themselves and view their personal identity.

Social Networking Sites and Identity Development

The use of SNS requires a shift in focus on how we understand student development theory in the context of current college students. Gonzales and Hancock (2011) stated that “social-networking sites exemplify how modern technology sometimes forces us to reconsider previously understood psychological processes” (p. 82). SNS allow students to construct their own online identity by choosing how, when and why “to indicate membership of certain subgroups, such as race, gender, sexual orientation and subcultures (e.g., music, movies)” (Mastrodicasa & Metellus, 2013). This shift in ownership of how to self-determine how the world perceives you as an individual should be considered when applying classic student development theory.

As outlined by Erikson (1968), the 5th stage of his development model focuses on “identity versus role confusion.” In Erikson’s (1968) model, the focus in all stages up until the 5th stage are focused on what is done *to* a person, whereas the 5th stage depends primarily upon what a person chooses to do. Social interactions and “fitting in” play a vital role in identity development during this stage, which is also influenced by developing a sense of morality and determining right from wrong. Those individuals who find success navigating this stage move through to develop strong affiliation with friends, causes and ideals. Individuals who struggle during this stage experience role confusion, which can lead to experimentation with multiple identities and with a delayed ability to begin developing solidarity with others in the next stage of development, causing isolation. Connected to that idea is that the primary psychosocial task of adolescence is the formation of identity and maturation into adulthood inspires two identity questions: “Who am I?” and “What is my place in this world?” (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). The expansion of connectedness due to social networking sites creates a larger unknown when contemplating both of those questions. An individual may not know who is seeing what he/she posts, nor how it is being understood and perceived, therefore potentially creating a sense of confusion about how one fits into the larger (and now digitally expansive) world. Gardner and Davis (2013) conducted qualitative interviews with 100 individuals aged 10 to 25 and found that SNS can “short-circuit identity formation” and alter how a student develops and can result in either (or both) positive and negative consequences. The use of SNS can allow a student to approach identity formation more deliberately, holistically, thoughtfully or enable the

student to succumb to a prepackaged identity or to endless role diffusion (Gardner & Davis, 2013, p. 32).

Davis (2011) interviewed 24 “digital youth,” aged 15-25 years, to explore how young people perceive opportunities for self-expression through digital media technologies. The ability to express one’s self through digital media (e.g. social networking sites) resulted in a deeper understanding of the strategies young people used “to reconcile the tension between multiplicity and consistency” in online spaces (Davis, 2011, p. 634). A deliberate approach to digital identity comprised four spheres of obligation – to self, interpersonal relationships, online social norms, and broad community-level values – each of which is given a weight by an individual when deciding how to express themselves in digital spaces (p. 634). Davis (2011) asserted that various social and personal factors lead to decisions about how to portray one’s self online and therefore has an influence on the alignment of online and offline identities for students. The spheres of obligation that Davis (2011) outlined interact and influence decision-making about self-presentation, and each sphere “serves to limit multiplicity online and contributes to the intertwinement of online and offline identities” (p. 649). Davis’s (2011) study provided further evidence that performance of identity online is possible, and illustrated the agency an individual has in how they decide to construct their identities in those spaces based on obligation they feel to themselves, others, and the broader community values.

Junco (2014) wrote that the emergence of online digital spaces has allowed youth to explore their identities in ways not previously possible. Junco referred to *online*

identification as the expressed online identity that students develop. There are three levels of expressed online identification:

1. True Identity: Creating a profile that includes a person's real name, real demographic information, and real pictures.
2. Pseudonymity: Allows for a level of anonymity with the ability to accrue a reputation. A user creates a fake name that is used to represent his or her online contributions.
3. Anonymity: The fullest level of true identity obscurity, with users not sharing any type of identifying information. When users are anonymous, they cannot accrue reputation in online spaces. (Junco, 2014, p. 106)

When studying how college students understand their own gender identities and how and when students decide to identify themselves along Junco's (2014) true identity, pseudonymity or anonymity spectrum, it is important to consider that social capital is an important component of understanding the motivations to use SNS and benefits of SNS connections. Social capital is emotional support, exposure to diverse ideas, and access to new information that are provided through social relationships and interactions (Mastrodicasa & Metellus 2013). Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007) studied a random sample of 800 undergraduate students at Michigan State University and found that Facebook played an important role in the process by which students formed and maintained social capital and found that "Facebook intensity predicted increased levels of maintained social capital, such as how participants relied on high school acquaintances to do small favors, used Facebook to keep in touch with old friends, and maintained or intensified relationships that were initiated through another connection such as residence

hall proximity or a shared class” (Mastrodicasa & Metellus, 2013, p. 24). Influencing social capital is a feature of social media use that directly influences development of identity. Asynchronicity and anonymity (or perceived anonymity) of social media allow students to “craft strategic self-presentations by deciding what information to highlight, downplay, exaggerate or leave out entirely” (Gardner & Davis, 2013, p. 63), which allows students to control perceptions that others have and may allow them to profit in terms of social capital.

In order to gain social capital, students have to be willing to engage with others in digital space, and they are increasingly more inclined to share information. Students are more likely to share personal information online than they may do in person, a process referred to by Suler (2004) as the “online disinhibition effect.” According to Bosch (2009), students may be hesitant to share personal information in class or face-to-face, but may be more likely to share comments, questions and personal experiences online. Junco, Heiberger, and Loken (2011) studied 125 students taking a first-year seminar course and found that once students share things online, they are more likely to open up in class and be engaged. The willingness of students to share more frequently and with greater depth on SNS allows for greater connection in digital space, but has also created complications in terms of student conduct and interpersonal interaction. For example, students may share photographs on SNSs that may incriminate them in a college policy violation investigation; students may harass one another via SNS; and students may be less likely to talk face-to-face about interpersonal issues as a result of SNS use.

Birnbaum (2013) conducted a study of 30 residence hall students and observed the “impression management techniques and standardized performances on social media,

specifically on Facebook” (p. 155). Birnbaum (2013) identified six general types of online personas among the students he observed: the partier, the socialite, the risk-taker, the comic, the institutional citizen, and the eccentric. These six types illustrated how residential college students present themselves to peers and provide insight into the value of impression management, social capital, and performing a role on SNSs.

In an attempt to create positive social media connections with students, institutions have adopted the use of social media and SNSs as tools for engagement. A study by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research during the 2012-2013 academic year found that 100 percent of the 474 colleges and universities studied reported the use of at least one form of social media to communicate information and engage with constituents (Barnes & Lescault, 2013). The study by Barnes and Lescault (2013) – first conducted in 2007-2008 and repeated each subsequent year - found that 99 percent of institutions reported using Facebook, and 94 percent of the institutions used Twitter accounts (an increase from 84 percent in the previous year’s study). In addition, 58 percent of top administrators (e.g., college president) at surveyed institutions used Facebook for official institutional communication, 55 percent used Twitter, and 35 percent utilized a blog. These numbers far out-pace social media use by top administrators at Fortune 500 corporations (40 percent of those CEOs used Facebook, 29 percent used Twitter and less than one percent blogged), demonstrating the importance of social media and SNSs in higher education in the United States in the 21st century.

As an example of how institutions are utilizing social media, Linvill, McGee, and Hicks (2012) noted that colleges and universities tend to use social media for three key

variations of content – distributing *useful information*, *generation of visitors*, and *conservation of visitors*. In a study of 1,130 Tweets from 113 institutions, Linvill, McGree, and Hicks (2012) found that institutions primarily employed Twitter as a news feed to a general population, and 70 percent of those tweets contained links, of which 52 percent of those were links to other parts of the institution's Internet presence. SNSs are a primary vehicle by which those in higher education communicate and share information and ideas, and institutional leaders have taken heed.

The integration of SNS use into the lives of students have motivated institutions to adopt marketing and communication practices that keep with current trends. Colleges and universities have been increasing their use of SNSs to recruit prospective students and communicate with current students through posts on Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter (Barnes, 2009; Barnes & Lescault, 2011). Ruthenbeck (2015) noted that institutions of higher education have used Facebook to create communities of interested individuals in digital space – to share information, interact, and engage about life on campus while not necessarily having to be on campus. Ruthenbeck (2015) also noted that cultivating digital relationships through SNSs provides institutions and opportunity to engage students and provide a sense of belonging, which is a vital aspect of the student experience, from membership (Astin, 1999; Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2012a) to acceptance (Maslow, 1968) to retention (Astin, 1984; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010; Tinto, 1993).

While institutions are adapting to SNSs and developing strategies to engage students via social media, they are faced with the challenge of determining institutional action related to student conduct on SNSs and social media. The United States

Government's Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (2003, 2010) outlined the responsibilities of institutions to respond to harassment, bullying and bias-related conduct both off-line and online. The OCR (2010) said that while institutions need to remain mindful of free speech rights pertaining to students, institutions are obligated to respond to harassment that is "sufficiently severe, pervasive, or persistent as to interfere with or limit a student's ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities or opportunities offered by a school" (p. 2).

Duggan (2014) conducted a study through The Pew Research Center of 2,849 internet users and reported that 73 percent of adults in the United States have witnessed online harassment and 40 percent have experienced online harassment. Of those who witnessed online harassment: 60 percent reported witnessing someone being called an offensive name, 53 percent had seen efforts to purposefully embarrass someone, 25 percent had seen someone being physically threatened, 19 percent witnessed someone being sexually harassed and 18 percent witnessed someone being stalked. Of the respondents who reporting having personally experienced online harassment, 27 percent had been called offensive names and 22 percent had someone purposefully embarrass them. Duggan (2014) also found that individuals age 18-24 are more likely than any other demographic group to experience online harassment, with 70 percent reporting personal experience has targets of at least one of the previously mentioned elements of harassment. Young women age 18-24 experienced harassment at disproportionately high levels, with 26 percent of those women reported being stalked online and 25 percent were targets of online sexual harassment.

Although social media sites encourage students to remain connected, it provides a new level of complication in regards to institutional monitoring and providing a safe learning environment (Knudson, 2015). Knudson (2015) noted the complicated relationship between first amendment cases such as *Tinker vs Des Moines Independent Community School District* in 1969 – which found that schools may limit or discipline student expression if school officials reasonable conclude that the expression will substantially disrupt the work and activities of the school (Lomonte, 2012). Institutions have a complicated task in determining if posts on social media and SNSs constitute bullying or a disruption to the work and activities of the school, or if they are simply independent thoughts posted by individuals protected under the first amendment of the United States Constitution. Typically, institutional student conduct systems and processes are used to adjudicate incidents of social media bullying. Joosten (2012) advocated for the creation of policies related to social media use on campuses that are not specific to one form of technology – not to limit the effect that cyberbullying may have on individuals, but rather to allow institutions to remain fluid and dynamic as they address concerns. Joosten (2012) specifically noted an institution in Wisconsin that created a policy on the use of pagers, and while pagers have come and gone in the last 20 years, the rigid policy addressing the use of pagers has limited the school’s mobile technology policies (p. 80). Joosten (2012) described the policy at Macalester College, which indicates that social media communication is subject to existing campus Responsible Use Policy, the Student Conduct Process, and the College’s Harassment and Grievance Procedures (p. 80). Macalester’s non-technology-specific approach has

allowed for flexibility and fluidity as SNSs have been created and change the way they influence student interaction.

The ASHE Higher Education Report on Social Media in Higher Education (2016) noted many of the challenges that institutions may face with the emergence of social media as a central focus of many students' lives. The report noted that "higher education administrators express concern that the ubiquity of social media... weakens students' ability to engage in meaningful personal reflection as part of the developmental process in college" (p. 96). Challenges such as the role of anonymity, cyberbullying, racial hostility, and building and maintaining healthy relationships are all an interesting part of the equation for college administrators when understanding the role of social media. The 21st century version of incivility has found a home on social media and in the comment sections of websites, and institutions are compelled to find methods of response to this evolving area of concern.

Institutions do not necessarily have reasonable control over opportunities for students to engage with one another online, therefore making it difficult to regulate computer-mediated communication. However, the ability for students to interact with one another in negative ways influences how students use SNS and social media.

Gender-Related Use of Social Media

The use of SNS and social media is influenced by gender roles. While the terms "male" and "female" are not inclusive of all definitions of the gender spectrum, the review of literature for the purposes of this paper will focus on definitions based on a male/female binary. A Pew Internet Research report by Perrin (2015) on social media

usage from 2005-2015 indicated that social media use skyrocketed during that decade thanks in large part to the creation of multiple popular platforms. Perrin (2015) showed that women and men use social media at a relatively similar rate – 68 percent of all adult women use social media compared to 62 percent of adult men (p. 3). In a study of 6,403 respondents to a survey on adult Internet use, Fallows (2005) indicated that there was no gender difference in overall amount of Internet use, but several studies have found that there were gender differences in motivations for Internet use and how time spent online was used. For instance, men are more likely to spend time online engaging in behavior “consistent with their gender role norm that promotes achievement-orientation” (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012, p. 108). Muscanell and Guadagno (2012) found in a study of 238 undergraduate psychology students that women were more likely to use the Internet to promote relationship maintenance and supplement social interaction, while men were more likely to spend time in task-focused activities like checking the weather or reading the news.

Lenhart (2015) conducted a study for the Pew Research Center which administered a survey to 1,060 teens aged 13-17, and found that girls tend to dominate visually-oriented social media platforms. This is an important measure in understanding how college students will use social media moving forward, as these students will be the next cohort on college campuses in the near future. Lenhart (2015) found that 61 percent of teen girls used Instagram compared to just 44 percent of teen boys. Teen girls used Snapchat at a higher rate (51 percent versus 31 percent of boys), and also used Tumblr and online pin boards like Pinterest at higher rates.

In their study of 238 college students, Muscanell and Guadagno (2012) found that women reported more frequent posting of public messages, photographs and private messages compared to men. In addition, men were more likely than women to use SNSs to find potential dates, play games online, make new friends and engage in career networking. Muscanell and Guadagno (2012) explained the results by citing research that supports the notion that men are stereotypically more adventurous and, therefore, more willing to meet people through online mediums, while women tend to guard information more closely and be more deeply engaged online with those they know and trust (Helgeson, 1994; Weiser, 2000, 2001; Williams et al., 2009; Fogel & Nehmad, 2009).

SNSs were created to connect individuals, so an understanding of how relationships are formed and evolve using SNSs is vital to understanding motivation for use. Foubert and Masin (2014) studied 200 college-aged participants on a large public campus in the Midwestern United States to determine the effects of gender and Facebook use on the development of mature interpersonal relationships, with “mature interpersonal relationships” being described using the definition from Chickering and Reisser (1993), which included tolerance and appreciation of differences and the capacity for intimacy. The results of the study indicated that a small, significant correlation existed between mature interpersonal relationships and Facebook use intensity. Foubert and Masin (2014) found a statistically significant negative correlation between peer relationships among males and Facebook intensity; those who had healthier peer relationships reported using Facebook less intensely (p. 54). So what does this mean for student relationships? Foubert and Masin (2014) claimed that while gender plays an important role in

developing mature interpersonal relationships, examining heavy versus light Facebook use provides greater insight into Chickering and Reisser's theory than simply analyzing gender differences.

Gender stereotypes both influence and are created by SNS use. Fox and Rooney (2015) studied 1,000 men aged 18-40-years old to examine SNS use in comparison to stereotypical narcissistic characteristics of men, such as egocentrism, a sense of grandiosity, dominance and entitlement. In the study, Fox and Rooney (2015) found that men who self-objectify and individuals with narcissistic traits reported spending more time on SNSs. The significance of stereotyped gendered behavior not only indicated how frequently men used SNSs, but also provided insight into *how* men use SNSs to present themselves. Those higher in narcissism posted selfie photos more frequently and may use SNS to achieve interpersonal and social goals despite their antisocial personality traits (Fox & Rooney, 2015, p. 163). The alignment of self-presentation in online spaces with stereotypical gender characteristics was illustrated in a study of 300 self-selected Facebook profile pictures. Rose, Mackey-Kallis, Shyles, Barry, Biagini, Hart, and Jack (2012) found marked differences in terms of how males and females present themselves across a number of traits selected to represent gender stereotypes. Measures for terms such as *attractive*, *dependence* and *sentimental* rated higher for female profile pictures, as anticipated by societal assumptions and stereotypes and by the researchers. Men rated higher for terms such as *dominance*, *active* and *independent*. Chu, Porche, and Tolman (2005) wrote that masculinity ideology theory postulates that men internalize cultural standards for masculinity, adapting their behavior and attitudes to cultural masculine norms.

Park, Yaden, Schwartz, Kern, Eichstaedt, Kosinski, Stillwell, Ungar, and Seligman (2016) found that women were more likely than men to demonstrate interpersonal warmth on social media. Park, et al. (2016) analyzed language used across 10 million messages from over 52,000 Facebook users to determine how men and women use language to express themselves on social media. Park, et al. (2016) found that online networks can often act as a social equalizer, “placing users at different power levels into similar social roles” (p. 21). So men - who traditionally hold authority positions - are placed into similar social roles as women, and therefore a flattening of social role theory allows men and women to communicate more similarly than anticipated. However, there were distinct differences found in the study, including the fact the men used language that was assertive and colder (e.g., swearing, criticism, controversial topics), while women used language that was assertive but warmer (e.g. expressions of positive emotion and warmth towards others).

Shepherd (2015) collected data from 474 participants to study the difference between Facebook composition among men and women. According to the study, Shepherd (2015) found that gender has a significant effect on certain activities on Facebook, including that women are more likely than men to make status updates, read friends’ page, and post self-made media content to their profile. Shepherd (2015) found that women tended to be more careful about the creation of their profile, including being more thoughtful in the selection of a profile picture and were more likely to think about reaction to images, privacy settings, and the scope of their intended audience.

The ability to control what is shared and when it is shared in digital space also allows an individual control over *how* it is shared, which provides opportunities for

manipulation of self-presentation. Hancock and Toma (2009) examined the impact of gender on self-presentation and social desirability and found that both women and men “edit” their profiles to create a better self-presentation through self-enhancement. The desire to attempt to be authentic but have the ability to edit and control self-presentation is what Bavelas, Black, Chovil, and Mullett (1990) referred to as *equivocal communication*, which “refers to communication which is non-straightforward, vague and ambiguous” (Hancock & Toma, 2009, p. 383). Individuals use this form of self-presentation not necessarily in order to be deceptive, because the individual *could* look like their online self with special care and extra preparation. Hancock and Toma (2009) referred to this posturing as a way for the individual to resolve the “tension between authenticity and self-enhancement” (p. 383).

An important connection between digital self-presentation and gender performance is that females perceive online discourse as displaying higher social presence than males, as noted by Davis, Lippman, Morris, and Tougas (2014). “Social presence” was first introduced by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) and is defined as the concept that “one communicator is aware of with whom he is communicating” (Davis, et al., 2014, p. 65). According to Davis, et al. (2014), females feel a greater presence with the other person when communicating online via SNS and females share more about themselves online than men. The willingness to share more information likely results in a greater connection to others when communicating online, but the lack of social presence for men in online, digital spaces can prove problematic as men are struggling to define who they are as men.

Hans, Selvidge, Tinker, and Webb (2011) argued that both male and female users communicate online in ways that “replicate and disrupt” established gender practices (p. 303). The opportunity for SNSs and digital spaces to be places where socially-constructed ideas about gender may be performed in socially-constructed spaces allows for both men and women to fall into patterns of stereotypical gendered behavior, but also frees them to perform their identity to their choosing. Though as discussed earlier, Davis and Laker (2004) noted that men have been socialized in a way that has not necessarily encouraged them to think about themselves as gendered beings, so even with a relatively blank digital slate on which to determine how they will perform their masculine identity, men may not be confident in how to accurately portray who they are as men.

It should be no surprise that men who struggle to understand their masculine identity in face-to-face interactions would also struggle with self-presentation in digital spaces. Digital interactions through SNSs most often remove visual cues like eye-to-eye contact and non-verbal body language, which can assist in interpersonal interactions. That conflict can cause disruption and dissonance for maturing young men, and SNSs are the playground for experimentation and opportunities for learning about how to present one’s self. Interactions on social media sites fall within the microsystem category that Bronfenbrenner (1979) outlined in his Ecological Theory Model. Transactional interactions on SNS are on a micro - or more immediate – level in Bronfenbrenner’s model. A step back from that is the mesosystem, where microsystems are in contact with one another and create a more complete picture of the greater environment that influences a student. It is at this point – in the mesosystem - where context collapse affects a student’s understanding of identity. Eaton (2014) described the interactions at the

mesosystem level by aligning the digital and physical environments. Eaton (2014) said "Social media users must navigate the interaction between digital environments and physical environments in a complex set of relational processes. boyd (2014) refers to this process as avoiding identity and context collapse" (para. 6). The various opportunities for identities and microsystems to bump into one another and disrupt or impede development is an area ripe for context collapse.

Miller, Parsons, and Lifer (2010) studied 165 undergraduate students in focus groups and found that students interviewed understood that not all potential audiences on SNSs are the same and that what they post in their profiles is not equally appropriate for all those potential audiences. Students in the study, however, continued to post information to their profiles that they felt was potentially inappropriate. Miller, Parsons, and Lifer (2010) found that males and females both expressed concern about who was viewing content on their profile pages, but males were more concerned about authority figures outside of their families (e.g., professors, potential employers, etc.) than their female counterparts.

There is a vital connection between context collapse and performed masculine identity. The pressure to perform as a man and fit into whatever socially constructed image of masculinity exists in that particular man's context can create internal conflict regarding identity. When that performance is then disbursed digitally and left open for interpretation by others, the collapsing contexts can create a dilemma for college men, such as: "That's not what I meant by that." "You misunderstood..." "I'm really not THAT guy." As an example, a college male may share a post objectifying women because of a masculine role defined by peers, but by doing so may jeopardize an opportunity for a

summer internship. So identity confusion for men negotiating masculinity among social systems is compounded by the idea that he does not even really know who is seeing what he is posting or how it is being interpreted.

In a small in-depth qualitative study of eight individuals, Jones (2009) found a noted distinction between an internally-driven process of “identity negotiation” and a more externally-focused process of “managing the perceptions of others” (p. 298). This revelation is tied to the idea that the struggle to determine identity is greatly influenced by both internal and external processing. A participant in Jones’ (2009) study said: “I don’t know if my identity necessarily changes depending on where I am but the person I present or choose to present may shift” (p. 299). The conclusion Jones (2009) made supports Goffman’s (1959) self-presentation theory that an individual’s presentation is a performance for the benefit of other people. While college men have traditionally faced this internal versus external processing challenge in face-to-face interactions, the growth of SNS and social media has added a layer of complexity.

Student Development Theory

The body of theoretical work around the development of college students can be organized into broad categories based on diverse ideas. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991 and 2005) suggested dividing theories into four core groups: psychosocial theories, cognitive theories, typology theories and person-environment interaction theories. For the purposes of this paper, focus will be placed on psychosocial theories (e.g., Erikson, 1959; Chickering, 1969; Heath, 1978) and cognitive-structural theories (e.g., Perry, 1970; Kohlberg, 1969; Loevinger, 1976) in order to analyze how and why men develop as they

do. Identity formation and development is a key component of college student development and is at the center of many student development theories. Identity is a “conscious sense of individual uniqueness” and an “unconscious striving for a continuity of experience” (Erikson, 1968, p. 208). The formation of identity is a process for college students and the effect of the college experience on that process has important consequences. Behavior – and particularly the behavior of men – is the outcome of interactions within social contexts and the institutional environment.

Cognitive-Structural Theories

Perry (1970) describes developmental turning points that can affect relationships, integrity and identity. As students move beyond absolute truths and simple solutions, they begin to empathize with others and begin to critically examine values and beliefs (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 8). Perry described these students as “moving off the fence” and making commitments to ideas, values and relationships (Chickering & Reisser 1993, p. 8).

Perry (1970) created nine positions in his Scheme of Intellection and Ethical Development. Perry’s model, based on data from male subjects, maps conceptually the development he observed in his research study to better understand the structures students use to understand the nature of knowledge, value and responsibility (p. 1). Perry’s scheme asserted that the developmental sequence “manifests a logical order – an order in which one form leads to another through differentiations and reorganizations required for the meaningful interpretation of increasingly complex experience” (1970, p. 3).

In Perry's model, movement through the nine positions is not rigidly linear but the progression through the scheme is general moving from Position 1 to Position 9. Perry grouped the nine positions into four major categories: Dualism/Received Knowledge (Positions 1-2); Multiplicity/Subjective Knowledge (Positions 3-4); Relativism/Procedural Knowledge (Positions 5-6); and Commitment/Constructed Knowledge (Positions 7-9). Perry (1970) classified dualism as an understanding of knowledge as either right or wrong and that the goal of learning is to simply understand what is being told to the student by an authority figure. Multiplicity is categorized by when a student realizes that there are conflicting answers, that multiple perspectives are not necessarily wrong, and that others are entitled to their views (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005, p. 35). Relativism is the recognition that multiplicity in the world leads to understanding that "knowledge is contextual and relative" (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005, p. 35).

The shift to relativism is vital and transformational because analytical thinking skills emerge and a recognition develops that not all positions are equally valid. It is most often at this point (between Position 6 and Position 7 in the scheme) that students most often stumble and are delayed in their progression. It is at this point that many college students – and in particular men – "move off the fence" in terms of making commitments to ideas, values and relationships (Chickering & Reisser 1993, p. 8). This crucial step is most often what determines how a college student will understand him/herself as a mindful being. Positions 7-9 fall into Perry's "Commitments in Relativism" and are classified by the testing of various propositions and truth claims, eventually making "an

active affirmation of themselves and their responsibilities in a pluralistic world, establishing their identities in the process” (King, 1978, p. 39).

The model created by Perry (1970) failed to analyze the differences in intellectual and ethical development based on gender. Perry (1970) studied almost entirely men and therefore fails to account for differences that are relevant to understanding a wider range of college students. Baxter Magolda (1992) created the Epistemological Reflection Model to understand college students’ “ways of knowing” and to account for Perry’s (1970) lack of female research participants. In a five-year qualitative study of 101 randomly selected students entering Miami University of Ohio, Baxter Magolda identified four ways in which college students make meaning, which included absolute knowing, transitional knowing, independent knowing and contextual knowing (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Baxter Magolda was clear that more similarities than differences exist between men and women’s ways of knowing, but she found gender-related differences in reasoning patterns. Similar to Perry, Baxter Magolda begins with concrete, dualistic thinking in her “absolute knowing” category of development. According to Baxter Magolda’s model, students begin in a phase categorized by dualistic thinking; there is a concrete right or wrong answer and authorities have all the answers (Baxter Magolda 2001). Within the “absolute knowing” phase, students begin following gender-based ways of thinking, which Baxter Magolda refers to as “patterns.” Women tend to exhibit a receiving pattern and value a passive approach to learning. Men, on the other hand, follow the mastery pattern – they ask questions, try out ideas with peers and instructors and take a more active role in acquiring knowledge.

Differences in development based on gender persist throughout Baxter Magolda's work, including the "transitional knowing" phase in which women tend to be more relational while learning, engaging in dialogue and sharing ideas. Men tend to be more impersonal in the transitional knowing stage, resorting to logic to explain ideas and engaging in debate and challenge when discussing ideas. In Baxter Magolda's "independent knowing" phase of development, students finally view themselves and their peers as valid sources of information. In this phase, women become *interindividual* knowers and acknowledge different perspectives on issues (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Women integrate other perspectives into their own and begin to identify more with authorities because they begin to recognize the value in their own voice. Men, on the other hand, tend to be *individual* knowers; they are less likely to integrate other perspectives into their own patterns of knowing and, despite valuing the exchange of opinions, they have difficulty balancing their voice with others. Baxter Magolda's (2001) findings may help explain why men might struggle with understanding how to perform their masculinity via SNSs – if men are less likely to integrate other perspectives, they might fail to recognize the perception of others or how what they say affects other students.

In the final phase of Baxter Magolda's model, students exhibited contextual knowing. The study concluded that students usually developed these traits after college, but it is characterized by students examining all aspects of a situation, seeking advice for appropriate context and integrating multiple perspectives into their decision-making. That final stage is what Baxter Magolda referred to as "self-authorship."

Kohlberg (1969) focused on moral development and the ability and willingness of a student to make ethical decisions. Kohlberg's theory created six stages in his model, moving from concrete to abstract thinking – developing on a continuum from decisions based on self-interest to decisions based on principles such as justice, equality and the “Golden Rule” (Chickering & Reisser 1993, p. 18). Kohlberg's Stage 1 is characterized by a child being egocentric and viewing everything as good and bad based on the individual's obedience to rules and authority (Donenberg & Hoffman, 1988). Stage 2 of Kohlberg's theory included behavior motivated by self-satisfaction and very occasionally consideration for the satisfaction of others. Stage 1 and Stage 2 comprise the “pre-conventional” level of morality.

The “conventional” level of morality included Stage 3, in which children focus on gaining approval and pleasing others, and Stage 4, in which children maintain social order for its own sake. Stage 5 is where individuals are more in tune with laws and rules that determine right and wrong behavior, and “where duty and obligation are in terms of contract not individual needs” (Donenberg & Hoffman, 1988). Stage 6, the final stage of the theory, is comprised of people who resolve conflicts by applying a universal principle (Kohlberg, 1969). As with other theories discussed in this paper, Kohlberg's theory assumed that increased autonomy and individuation led to more advanced moral thinking (Donenberg & Hoffman, 1988).

Kohlberg's study involved an all-male sample, therefore making differentiation and analysis based on gender impossible. Each of Kohlberg's dilemmas focused on a male voice, making it difficult for females to relate to and therefore difficult to generalize

the model. One of the researchers who challenged the generalizability of Kohlberg's theory across the male-female binary was Gilligan (1982).

Gilligan (1982) asserted that females develop differently than males, particularly as it related to moral development and relationships with others. Gilligan found that women define themselves through others and their relationships, and men tend to be more individually-focused, separating themselves from the world. Gilligan (1982) articulated her stance that females develop differently than males by emphasizing two moral voices, the *morality of care* and the *morality of justice*. Donenberg and Hoffman (1988) described this by saying that the “moral imperative for men is to respect rights and protect the rights to life and self-fulfillment” while women “are more concerned with the welfare of other people” (p. 704-705). The tendency to measure moral development by analyzing prosocial behaviors and characteristics like empathy, altruism and guilt favors females, a departure from Kohlberg's results that showed men on average reached a slightly higher level of moral development than women did. Gilligan's model might be simplified as “men reason” and “women feel.” This may mean that men use social media and SNSs to interact more directly, more concretely and more analytically; women may be more likely to use SNSs to develop and maintain relationships and “feel” more readily than men.

Psychosocial Theories

Erikson (1959, 1963, and 1968) focused on three elements of psychosocial development, according to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005). The first is the epigenetic principle, which stated that “anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of this

ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole” (Erikson, 1968, p. 92). The second focus is that each stage of development involves crises, when a distinctive challenge requiring significant choices for an individual. The third focus in relation to college students is *identity vs identity confusion*, the dominant developmental task for traditional college-aged students. Erikson (1968) focused on the social context of development and created eight stages, each with a life challenge that can lead to progress, regression, standstill or recurring bouts with the same issue in a new context (Chickering & Reisser 1993, p. 22). Each of Erikson’s eight stages requires a resolution of a crisis which enables the individual to exhibit the necessary qualities to move on to the next stage of development.

Erikson (1959) named stages of development that are most often identified with the traditional-aged college student in his 5th stage (Identity vs Identity Confusion) in which he addresses how and when adolescents start experimenting with who they are and start caring about how others view them. Put simply, identity occurs in adolescence and is when teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity and is when an individual knows who he is and what he believes; identity confusion (also referred to as “role confusion”) is marked by a time in development when an individual may not understand how others view him and, therefore, he is unable to understand how to view himself or who he is and is becoming. The identity confusion stage often includes individuals feeling insecure in their identity and involves feelings of confusion and self-doubt. It is this 5th stage that is so vital to a college student’s understanding of who he/she might be. In this stage, students may experiment with different roles, activities and behaviors as they work toward an understanding of who they are and where they fit into

the world around them. Individuals who receive encouragement and reinforcement through this stage of personal exploration and experimentation will develop a stronger sense of self and a sense of independence and control over their own identity. Those who do not clarify beliefs or sense of self will, in effect, not solve the crisis before them and will remain confused about their role and the future.

Erikson (1968) also addressed traditional college student development in the 6th stage (Intimacy vs Isolation), by discussing the development of intimate relationships and understanding individual roles in relationship formation. The crisis of self-identity must see some form of resolution before young adults can successfully navigate the 6th stage and begin to form intimate relationships. A strong sense of self allows individuals to form lasting relationships and avoid isolation and loneliness.

Erikson (1968) proposed that there is a delay in the identity vs role confusion between males and females because the identity of females is in large part derived from intimate connections with others. Erikson's hypothesis on gender was affirmed by Gilligan (1982) and Adams and Archer (1994), who asserted that women are socialized in a relational environment and therefore do create an identity based off of relationships with others. The socialization women use to formulate identity is therefore already limited in male identity development and may be delayed even more by the use of SNSs. Engagement with SNSs allow men to connect with one another, but it does not necessarily require (or even encourage) men to form face-to-face intimate connections that women use to develop their sense of identity.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) build on the original model developed by Chickering (1969) that focuses on seven vectors of development. While many models of

development are sequential, Chickering and Reisser (1993) allow for movement in a linear way but also recognize that some fluidity may be necessary. The college experience likely assists in a student moving along the first four vectors, and growth in each of those areas helps construct identity (Chickering & Reisser 1993, p. 37). By developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence and developing mature relationships, students then are set up well to establish their identity. Chickering and Reisser assert that establishing one's own identity includes (but is not limited to) comfort with appearance, comfort with gender orientation, sense of self in a social context, sense of self in response to feedback from valued others, self-esteem and personal stability and integration (1993, p. 38). Chickering and Reisser's (1993) model breaks down the fifth stage of Erikson's (1968) model into more specific components. The seven vectors include:

1. **Developing competence:** Intellectual, physical, manual and interpersonal competence.
2. **Managing emotions:** Develop awareness and acceptance of emotions.
3. **Moving through autonomy toward interdependence:** Function with self-sufficiency and self-direction.
4. **Developing mature interpersonal relationships:** Tolerance of and appreciation for differences; capacity for intimacy.
5. **Establishing identity:** Sense of self in social, historical and cultural context; clarification of self-concept through roles and lifestyle; sense of self in response to feedback from valued others; self-acceptance and self-esteem; personal stability and integration.

6. **Developing purpose:** Vocational plans and aspirations; personal interests; interpersonal and family commitments.
7. **Developing integrity:** Humanizing values – shift from literal belief in absoluteness of rules; personalizing values – set of personal guidelines; developing congruence – behavior consistent with personalized values (p. 38-39).

SNS use affects how students develop in each vector and adds an additional layer of external influence. Individuals meet the needs of these vectors as they develop, and while the path through the seven vectors is not necessarily linear, it tends to follow the pattern in the order Chickering and Reisser (1993) detailed. In the current digital age, students must negotiate the use of SNSs while understanding internal development and interpersonal relationships. The influence of SNSs may be both promote and inhibit development for students, as outlined below:

1. **Developing competence** may be influenced as students learn how use SNSs – how to manipulate profiles, how to acquire knowledge and how to build a set of digital skills to analyze and synthesize. Positive growth may occur as students develop skills and aptitude with digital tools, while negative effects may be an under-developed sense of self-discipline if a student is not able to control duration or limits to the use of SNSs.
2. **Managing emotions** may be influenced as students learn to cope with stressors that include anxiety, depression, guilt and shame. SNS interactions may evoke emotional responses without appropriate opportunities for outlet or analysis and could negatively affect emotional stability and control. SNSs may influence a

student's growth positively by allowing opportunities to share emotions and connect with others who may be experiencing similar emotions.

3. **Moving through autonomy toward interdependence** requires students to be less bound by others' opinions, which can pose significant issues in relation to SNSs because of the ability for others to judge and provide instant feedback in digital spaces. SNSs may affect this stage positively by providing students an opportunity to become more "mobile" by providing opportunities to find information and resources to fulfill personal needs without adults having to provide direction.
4. **Developing mature interpersonal relationships** involves students demonstrating a tolerance and appreciation of differences and a capacity for intimacy. This acceptance of diversity and the move away from self-centered and biased views of the world is both promoted by and inhibited by SNSs. The use of digital tools enables students to broaden the scope of understanding of the world and include multiple perspectives into their choices related to relationships, but it may also broaden the base of influence that is unwilling or unable to accept changes in relationships. For instance, a student who maintains strong digital connections to childhood friends who enable over-dependence may not be able to develop nurturing, long-lasting relationships that demand equity.
5. **Establishing identity** is at the core of how SNSs influence student development along the seven vectors. Development of identity requires comfort with oneself (including appearance, gender, sexuality, etc.), self-acceptance and self-esteem and personal stability and integration. The use of SNSs may inhibit development

in this area when an individual is confused about who he/she is and how he/she wants to be portrayed in digital space. The ability that a student has to manipulate appearance and context on SNSs may cause conflict and confusion. Conversely, the ability to pick and choose how one is viewed through SNS use may positively influence the establishment of identity by freeing an individual to explore all facets of his/her identity.

6. **Developing purpose** is related to vocation, or “calling,” and SNS use may promote the development of purpose by creating opportunities for connection and exploration of personal interests beyond what students without access to SNSs may experience. The power that SNSs have to help students develop career connections and more quickly find out about (and apply for) jobs may inhibit a development of purpose by speeding up the process of qualifying oneself for a job rather than focusing on building broadly-applicable skills and experiences.
7. **Developing integrity** is tied closely to establishing identity because it is the integration of values into how a student balances self-interest with the interest of others. Developing integrity requires affirming personal values while respecting the views of others, which may be negatively influenced by the use of SNSs if a student cannot accurately depict their values or if their actions in digital spaces does not align with their personal values. SNSs may positively influence growth in the area of developing integrity if students can engage in dialogue about values and can respect the values of others in digital spaces.

While the use of SNSs may not always assist students in developing along the vectors defined by Chickering and Reisser (1993), SNSs do provide opportunities for

development in many cases. Wang, Tchernev, and Solloway (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of 28 undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university in the United States and found that SNS use is significantly driven by emotional, cognitive, social, and habitual needs and those needs were met through engagement with others through SNSs. And while Wang, Tcherneve, and Salloway (2012) did not find that participants reported immediate social needs being met through the use of SNSs, Steinfeld, Ellison, and Lampe (2008) found that SNS use improved social relationships and social capital over time, after the opportunity for long-term accumulation of social relations and resources.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) acknowledged that differences may exist between how males and females develop autonomy, something that Chickering (1969) did not include in his initial work. In his original theory, Chickering (1969) asserted that establishment of autonomy was necessary prior to developing the capacity for intimacy. Research has shown that women often develop intimacy prior to developing autonomy and that meaningful relationships often help shape autonomy for women (Straub, 1987; Gilligan, 1982). Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that males demonstrate autonomy by playing by the rules and through separation while women develop autonomy in ways that preserve relationships and harmony.

A study by Foubert, Nixon, Sission, and Barnes (2005) used a longitudinal study of 247 undergraduate students (274 surveyed at the beginning of their sophomore year at the institution and 247 of those individuals were also surveyed at the end of their senior year) to examine Chickering and Reisser's theory through the context of gender difference demonstrated that women are more developmentally advanced than men in the ability to

develop mature interpersonal relationships and have a more advanced capacity for intimacy throughout college than men. Foubert, et al. (2005) also discovered that men reported less tolerance than women, which is a crucial component of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory because developing a high degree of tolerance "provides students with skills to comprehend the unfamiliar rather than dismiss or degrade it" (p. 469).

Perhaps more vital to male college student identity development within an increasingly digital world is the social environment. In his Ecological Theory Model, Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated that development occurs as a result of the interaction of a person and the environment and that individuals are part of larger social ecosystems that are connected. This "ecology" consists of four components: process, person, context and time. The person, or college student, is the focus of the development and possesses certain characteristics and personality traits that influence or impact the trajectory of his/her development. The person develops thorough proximal processes that are the interactions that spur or retard their development. All of this takes place through time and in context. Context is the component of the theory that illustrates the intersection of digital identity development and male gender identity development, and it includes four components:

- Microsystem: Activity and face-to-face interactions in the immediate environment.
- Mesosystem: Processes that take place between or as a result of microsystem contact and/or overlap.
- Exosystem: Influence an individual but do not directly include them.

- Macrosystem: Overall contextual beliefs that influence the whole system.

The microsystem is where daily interactions for students tend to take place. “A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing persons in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social and symbolic features that invite, permit or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 15). Evans, et al. (2010) noted that “although Bronfenbrenner did not include computer-mediated contexts in which college students now experience ‘activities, roles and interpersonal relations’ in the 21st century it seems reasonable to include these contexts, which are not face-to-face settings, in the definition of microsystems since they are sites where social, physical, and symbolic features may provide or retard engagement with the environment” (p. 163). In fact, traditional student development theory and models of identity development among college-aged students do not focus on the influence of digital interaction and engagement, which indicates a gap in our understanding of how modern day students are developing differently than those who preceded them. Junco (2014) noted:

Identity development models... focus exclusively on identity development in the offline world – the expression of and interaction within a community that leads to changes and movement along a development path. However, the emergence of online social spaces has allowed youth to explore their identities in ways not previously possible (p. 105).

Male Gender Identity Development and Masculinity

The ways in which college men understand their masculinity are complex and nuanced. There is a socialized understanding of how men are *supposed* to behave – particularly in college – and men who feel they fail to portray their masculinity in those ways have difficulty understanding their own identity. While men have long held privileged positions in society and in higher education in the United States, this review of literature will focus on how gender is defined and understood in the context of higher education in the United States and how college affects men differently than women. In addition, focus will be given to the psychosocial development and social behavior of college-aged men.

The effects of college are somewhat different based on gender. The transition to college can be filled with challenges for men as they enter new environments where specific sets of gendered norms dictate behavior. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) summarized the research post-1990 in terms of net effects of college on students according to gender. According to the research, men and women change to about the same extent during college in their level of identity development and locus of control, but women gain slightly more than men in self-esteem (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 620). This might mean that while men and women develop their identity in similar progression, men are slightly less confident in their self-perception and feeling of self-worth as they develop.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also summarized that women may derive greater cognitive growth (such as reflective thinking and critical thinking) than men from living on campus during college. An interesting note in the development of men is that the

localized community (e.g. a residence hall community) in which they live and by which they are most greatly influenced in terms of social norming and influence therefore has less effect on them than it does on their female counterparts.

Men often do not live up to the roles assumed through traditional social constructs (Capraro, 2000) and may, as a result, experience Gender-Role Conflict, described by O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, and Wrightsman (1986) as "a psychological state where gender roles have negative consequences or impact on a person or others" (p. 306). In short, Gender-Role Conflict occurs when tension exists between what a man feels he should be and what he actually is. The resulting conflict can cause a dissonance for men that can lead to misbehavior or actions in opposition to social norms.

As noted by Laker and Davis (2002), college men often behave badly. Male college students are qualitatively overrepresented among perpetrators of violence and destructive behaviors (Ludeman, 2004; Pollack, 2000). College men are responsible for higher rates of sexual harassment and assault, violence, alcohol and drug abuse than female counterparts (ACHA, 2015; Berk, 1990; Downey & Stage, 1999; Levin & McDevitt, 1993). D'Augelli (1991) found that male students are responsible for more hate-motivated assaults than women and are more likely to exhibit racist and homophobic attitudes. The National College Health Association surveyed 93,034 undergraduate students in the spring of 2015 and found that male college students were more likely than their female counterparts to be involved in a physical fight, a physical assault, or a verbal threat. In addition, the NCHA (2015) survey showed that female students reported sexual touching without consent at more than double the rate that men did, and that women were two and a half times more likely to report being stalked than men. Researchers have

found that gender was significantly related to whether a student persisted in college, with women being retained and persisting at higher rates than their male counterparts (Astin, 1975; Astin, Korn, & Green, 1987; Tinto, 1987). In addition, Foste, Edwards, and Davis (2012) cited research that demonstrated that men who adhere to dominant ideologies are more likely to experience depression (Good & Wood, 1995), sexually assault women (Kilmartin, 2001), espouse homophobic views (Rhoads, 1995) and be overrepresented in judicial offenses (Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005).

Perhaps most notably in popular media, issues of alcohol over-use and sexual assault remain prevalent on college campuses. The CDC and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010) reported that males successfully commit suicide at nearly four times the rate of females and account for 78.8 percent of all suicides in the United States and suicide is the third-leading cause of death among males age 15-24 years. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2015) reported that one in five women are sexually assaulted while in college. Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, Merrick, Chen, and Stevens (2011) found in *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* that 98 percent of females and 93 percent of male rape survivors reported that their assailants were male. Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, and McAuslan (2001) noted that approximately one-half of sexual assault cases in the United States involved alcohol consumption by the perpetrator, survivor, or both, an indicator that while alcohol is not a direct cause of sexual assault, the co-occurrence of alcohol and sexual assault demonstrates a connection between alcohol's effects on sexual and aggressive behavior and alcohol's effects on cognitive and motor skills contributing to sexual assault occurrences (para 1).

Kuh and Arnold (1993) found that fraternity men engaged in the “heaviest, most frequent and problematic drinking in college” (p. 327). Data from the American College Health Association (2014), which surveyed 66,887 undergraduate students at 140 institutions, indicated that men used alcohol more frequently than women in the 30 days prior to the survey: 47.2 percent of men used alcohol between 1-9 days in the previous 30 days, while 52.7 percent of women did in the same time period. However, 17.3 percent of men indicated that they used alcohol 10-29 days of the previous 30 days while just 12.9 percent of women reported the same use (p. 6). Men also engaged in “binge drinking” more frequently than women – according to the data by the NCHA (2014), 39.5 percent of men indicated that they consumed seven or more drinks the last time they socialized while just 16.1 percent of women claimed to have consumed seven or more drinks the last time they socialized (p. 8). Another statistic that highlighted frequency and volume of alcohol use, 14.3 percent of men also reported consuming five or more drinks in a sitting within the last two weeks while just 7.9 percent of women reported similar use (p. 8).

So how did college men get to this particular stage in life with mixed messages and ideas about what it means to be a man? Harris III and Barone (2011) noted that “educators often rely on ‘boys will be boys’ reasoning to make sense of young men’s tendencies to engage in risky and objectionable behavior” (p. 57). The “boys will be boys” mentality creates opportunities for men to learn socially-defined behaviors and live out stereotypes from a very young age that may be unhealthy or even harmful to others. An internal struggle to understand self-identity, combined with external, societal pressure and expectation about masculinity, can create conflict for young men.

O'Neil (1981) proposed the concept of male gender role conflict, which is manifest through the anxiety and conflict that arises when men are unable to express their masculinity through stereotypical expectations. O'Neil (1981) also stated that one of men's greatest fears is that they may not be perceived as masculine or that others may have suspicions about their sexual orientations. According to Kimmel (2010), homophobia is "a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood" (p. 24). Homophobia is greater than an irrational fear of gay men or the fear that we might be perceived as gay, Kimmel (2010) argued, but more accurately the fear that other men "will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men" (p. 24). This fear is particularly amplified among college men who live and function in exclusive communities such as fraternities, athletic teams, and single-sex living communities (Harris III & Barone, 2011, p. 57).

Much focus has been given by researchers to the ways in which masculinity has been socially constructed (Weber, 2001; Kimmel & Messner, 2004; Kimmel 2008) and therefore how it affects boys starting in childhood. Kimmel and Davis (2011) said that "boys learn how to be a man from an early age in playgrounds, schoolrooms, religious institutions, and homes, and are taught by peers, media, parents, teachers, coaches – just about everywhere and from everyone" (p. 7). Gender, similar to race and class, is socially constructed (Weber, 2001) and therefore expression of gender is learned and taught behavior. Edwards (2007) said, "Men may be born, but men become men through a complex interaction with the dominant culture's gender expectations of men" (p. 4).

Harper and Harris III (2010) posited that men do not have to think about being men. Davis (2010) noted that gender is "not on the radar" screen for college men. So

how do college men understand their masculinity? Gender differences result from a variety of factors, including socialization and biology. Goffman (1976) used “gender display” to examine how gender is constructed through interactions. “If gender can be defined as the culturally established correlates of sex (whether in consequence of biology or learning), then gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates” (p. 69).

While the definitions and expectations of masculinity are socially constructed, they are also contextual and often change in different environments and in what Bronfenbrenner (1979) referred to as “social surrounds.” As a result, men often struggle to make the transition to college, which Harris and Struve (2009) described as “new places in which a specific set of gendered norms govern students’ behavior” (p. 3). If gender is conditional based on “social surround,” it is a socially constructed concept and therefore it is a performed identity (Harper & Harris III, 2010, p. 17). Hans, Selvidge, Tinker, and Webb (2011) concurred, noting that performative theory posits that gender is not specifically something humans *have*, but rather, something they *do*.

Butler’s (1990) notion of gender performativity theorized that gender is constructed through repetitive performance of that gender. Similarly to Goffman (1959), Butler stated that the repetition of gendered acts construct a gender identity and the individuals (the “actors”) come to believe in their role and continue its performance. Butler argued that masculine and feminine morphologies are ideal constructions by which all individuals must feel inadequate, thus creating a need to perform and attempt to exhibit the characteristics of gender.

Becoming aware of gender assumptions and expectations and understanding how it might be performed for others is rooted in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Arnett (2001) researched the cultural and social influences on emerging adults and focused important parts of his work on the difference between adolescent development in males versus females. In his work, Arnett (2001) indicated that socialization – the influence of family and friends and the surrounding societal norms – greatly affect how adolescents grow into adults. The core difference between males and females was that manhood was something that had to be earned by boys, and that enduring image of competition and achievement to secure masculinity is one of the primary indicators of gender difference from a young age. During the adolescent transition, Arnett (2001) asserted that boys typically had less contact with their families and more contact with their peers, a difference from girls, who tended to have close relationships with their mothers and work alongside their families more frequently. Arnett (2001) also indicated that during adolescence, the “world expands for boys” while it contracted for girls. Opportunities and encouragement increased for males, while new restrictions were placed on girls. While women were discouraged from taking risks or striving for success, men were held to three standards needed to be considered a man: provide skills that were economically useful, protect his family, and procreate and continue his lineage with offspring.

Tied closely to Arnett’s work is the idea of pressure imposed on adolescents to conform to socially-defined gender roles. The influence of cultural and societal expectation during adolescence may also be viewed using Hill and Lynch’s (1983) “Gender Intensification Hypothesis.” That hypothesis stated that psychological and

behavioral difference between males and females became more pronounced at adolescence because of intensified pressures to conform to culturally prescribed roles. Adolescence is a time for exploration and self-discovery, and Arnett's (2001) research demonstrated the significant role social norms and cultural pressures place on maturing young adults and men often face unrealistic and stereotypical gender expectations.

The development of stereotypes indicating how boys and men are supposed to act led to Connell's (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity. Rooted in feminist theories and the role of patriarchy (Good, 1982; Snodgrass, 1977) and research of Australian high schools by Kessler, Ashenden, Connell, and Dowsett (1982), Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) defined hegemonic masculinity as "the pattern of practice that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (p 832). The concept of hegemonic masculinity, as defined by Connell (1987), was applied to education to understand dynamics in the classroom, "including patterns of resistance and bullying among boys" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 833). This useful application of the theory provided insight into why boys and young men behaved the way they did and signified an understanding of how complex historical gender roles and socialization influenced how men developed. That is, men have perceived roles of dominance in society and the pressures associated with living up to those socially-constructed standards created rules and regulations that men felt a need to abide by to develop appropriately in the eyes of society.

Preceding Connell (1987) was work by Brannon (1976) that outlined a "Boy Code" – a set of rules boys follow as they develop into men. Brannon's theory, despite appearing before Connell's use of "hegemonic masculinity" as a term, defined the social characteristics assumed by men in a society that perpetuated the notion that men have a

dominant role over women. Complementing the notion of hegemonic masculinity is the theory that men develop in a unique social sphere of constructed pressures, expectations and regulations. Brannon (1976) described the constructed expectations of boyhood and masculinity as “Boy Code.” Brannon (1976) described “Boy Code” using four principles:

1. The Sturdy Oak: Avoid vulnerability; stay tough and in control.
2. Give ‘em Hell: act aggressively to become dominant.
3. The Big Wheel: strive for achievement and success; focus on competition.
4. No Sissy Stuff: distance self from femininity and homophobia; avoid emotions (p. 12).

Brannon (1976) asserted that the “Boy Code” results in these four stereotypical methods of gender performance are socially embedded in young men. As a result, young men often arrive at college with preconceived and misguided notions of how to act as men because of messages they receive throughout their childhood and adolescence.

Kimmel (2008) reaffirmed that message by noting that masculinity is learned behavior:

“To be a man is to participate in social life as a man, as a gendered being. Men are not born, they are made. Men make themselves, actively constructing their masculinities within a social and historical context. We are born as a biological males, but we develop an identity as a man through a process of complex interactions with culture and in turn, learn the gender scripts that are important in our culture” (p. xxii).

Kimmel (2008) called his unique social sphere “Guyland.” Guyland is the space and time in a man’s journey from adolescence into adulthood – a vulnerable and

impressionable time when messages received about how to act are embedded into the minds and actions of young men. Kimmel (2008) interviewed over 400 young men to understand how they struggled to negotiate manhood with themselves and their peers and “what their social interactions entail and signify” (Harper & Harris III, 2010, p. 9). Kimmel (2008) summarized his key findings on male development in four main statements:

1. “Guyland becomes the arena in which young men so relentlessly seem to act out, seem to take the greatest risks, and do some of the stupidest things” (p. 42).
2. “Directionless and often clueless, [men] rely increasingly on their peers to usher them into adulthood and validate their masculinity” (p. 42).
3. “[Men] feel incomplete and insecure, terrified that they will fail as grownups, that they will be exposed as fraudulent men” (p. 42).
4. “Guyland is a volatile stage, when one has access to all the tools of adulthood with few of the moral and familial constraints that urge sober conformity. These ‘almost men’ struggle to live up to a definition of masculinity they feel they had no part in creating, and yet from which they feel powerless to escape” (p. 43).

The transitions from childhood to adolescence and then from adolescence to adulthood are shaped by these social definitions of masculinity. When young men enter college, the new-found sense of independence and new social surroundings can compound the confusion around identity development. Edwards and Jones (2009) wrote that college men experience intense expectations about being a man and that the social expectations they face entering college include “being competitive, in control of emotions or unemotional, aggressive, responsible, the breadwinner, in a position of authority,

rational, strong, successful, tough and breaking the rules” (pp. 214-215). In order to meet expectations from peers, Edwards and Jones (2009) said that college men “put on a performance that was like wearing a mask,” and that one participant in the study described his performance as “putting my man face on” (p 209).

Edwards and Jones (2009) described several phases that college men experience while learning to perform masculinity in college. In the first phase, they feel a need to put on a mask in order to meet society’s expectations, to portray an image of a man, and to cover up aspects of self that do not fit society’s expectations (p 215). In the second phase, which Edwards and Jones (2009) call “wearing a mask,” college men begin to act out, rationalizing and accepting transgressions of society’s expectations and by “partying” as college men (p 215). Finally, college men enter a third phase, which Edwards and Jones (2009) described as “experiencing and recognizing consequences of wearing a mask,” in which men create demeaning and degrading relationships with women, limit relationships with other men, and lose authenticity and humanity (p 215). Passing through the three phases allows men to then understand the ways that the mask does not fit and begin to critically examine their performance and begin to transcend external expectations of masculinity.

In addition to sex-role development in childhood, the various challenges that college men face while attempting to develop an understanding of their own identity have been written about extensively (Davis, 2002; Kellom, 2004; Laker, 2009; Harris III & Struve, 2009; Harper & Harris III, 2010). What does it mean to be a male college student? Higher education in the United States was an arena for the education of almost exclusively men for the first two centuries of its existence. Harvard was founded in 1636

but it was not until 205 years later that Oberlin College awarded a bachelor's degree to a woman (Harper & Harris III, 2010). Because of this history, Harper and Harris III (2010) noted that college men develop identity in a social system that has traditionally and historically given advantages to men. And Harris III and Barone (2011) noted that while current media rhetoric may lead us to believe that men are in a crisis, there are currently more men entering, being retained and graduating from college than at any other point in history. Connell (1987) discussed hegemonic masculinity as the idea that men have a dominant position over women in society, and that notion has fostered a patriarchal social system and men's identity has perpetuated that system, including within the realm of higher education in the United States.

Scott and Robinson (2001) developed the Key Model of White Male Identity Development. While Scott and Robinson's (2001) theoretically-derived identity model focused on the development of white men, it provides insight into the idea of discussing masculinity at the intersection of race and privilege, an idea reinforced by Pack-Brown's (1999) statement that "the general developmental issue for whites is the abandonment of entitlement" (p. 89). Scott, Livingston, Havice, and Cawthon (2012) noted that the Key Model's basic foundational structure can be applied beyond just white men to include men in general as they struggle with issues related to gender and how they relate to women and culturally different men. By examining the intersection of race, privilege and entitlement, we are able to see more clearly how race and gender attitudes converge and are exhibited through performed identity. The Key Model is not a linear construction, but there is a progression through which men exhibit development. The model is broken into five main "types," with summary descriptions as follows:

1. Non-contact Type: Attitudes of individuals include little or no knowledge of other races or of their own race; will ignore, deny or minimize issues of race; ethnocentrism and belief in the superiority of White men to women and to people of color.
2. The Claustrophobic Type: Individuals blame “outsiders” (i.e., persons of color, women); gains power by restricting opportunity for women and people of color; views women and people of color in stereotypical ways.
3. Conscious Identity Type: Individuals often experience precipitating event that creates dissonance between an existing belief system and real-life experiences with women and people of color; man re-evaluates his culture and recognizes that both racism and sexism play an important role in how he views and blames others for current social situation.
4. Empirical Type: Individual realizes racism and sexism are real; individual recognizes he has been misplacing blame and recognizes own privileged existence and how it has allowed for an easier negotiation of life.
5. Optimal Type: This person has changed his worldview into a holistic understanding of the common struggle of all people for survival; views working with and interacting in other ways with people independent of their identity is meaningful; functions with a positive intrinsic drive and does not measure worth and esteem with external criteria (p 418-420).

Grouping men of a similar age together – as is what happens in a college setting – allows for the proliferation of certain types and can often result in men struggling to move through types to reach the optimal level. However, Scott and Robinson (2001) also

noted that their model is a starting point and a means of advancing understanding of white male identity, therefore making college environments places that are potentially ripe for conversation and investigation of privilege and power that men hold.

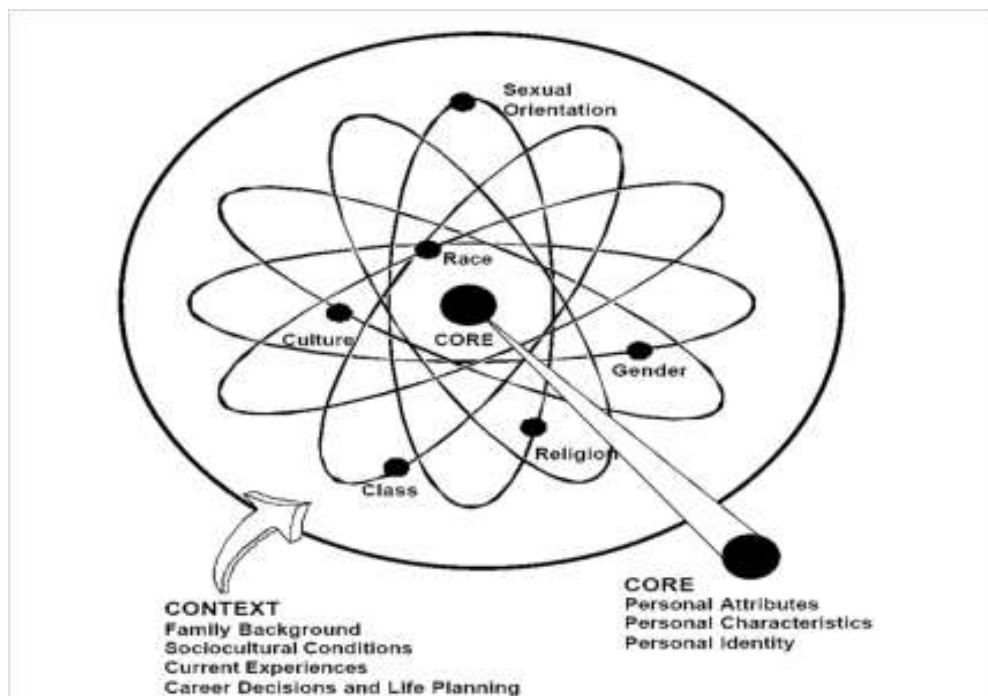
The time period during college that is so vital to understanding male power, privilege and person identity that overlaps with the transition through adolescence is at the core of Kimmel's (2004) "Guyland." Guyland exists in college and, as Kimmel (2004) noted, "the passage between adolescence and adulthood has morphed from a transition moment to a separate life stage" (p. 25). That separate life stage lives and breathes on college campuses around the country, and perhaps no more strongly than at campuses that include a residential component: men living in close quarters and sharing academic and non-academic experiences and viewing life through the lens of Guyland.

As noted by Harris III and Edwards (2010), much of the classic student development theories were "developed from androcentric points of view that prioritized the experiences of white men" (p. 44). And because of the focus on men (particularly white men), the approaches offered little "to enhance student affairs educators' understandings of gender as it is expressed by both men and women in college" (Harris III and Edwards, 2010). In fact, Davis and Laker (2004) argued that classic student development theories ironically serve to reinforce patriarchy and male privilege by rendering men's experiences as the norm. Not only does that undermine the experiences of women, it does not allow for a full exploration of how and why men develop in different ways or at different times.

Jones and McEwen (2000) framed the analysis of how an individual finds identity through the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI), which emerged from "a

growing awareness of the non-singular nature in which individual identities are constructed and self-perceived” (p. 410). According to Jones and Abes (2013), the MMDI presumes a distinction between personal identity and social identities. Jones and McEwen (2000) included a number of factors that create an identity, characteristics such as race, sex, class, culture, religion and sexual orientation. These traits revolve around the core of the individual and characteristics such as family background, sociocultural conditions and current experiences provide the contextual influences on identity development. The core of the MMDI model is the individual’s personal identity, and the areas surrounding the core are multiple social identities (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity



(Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 409)

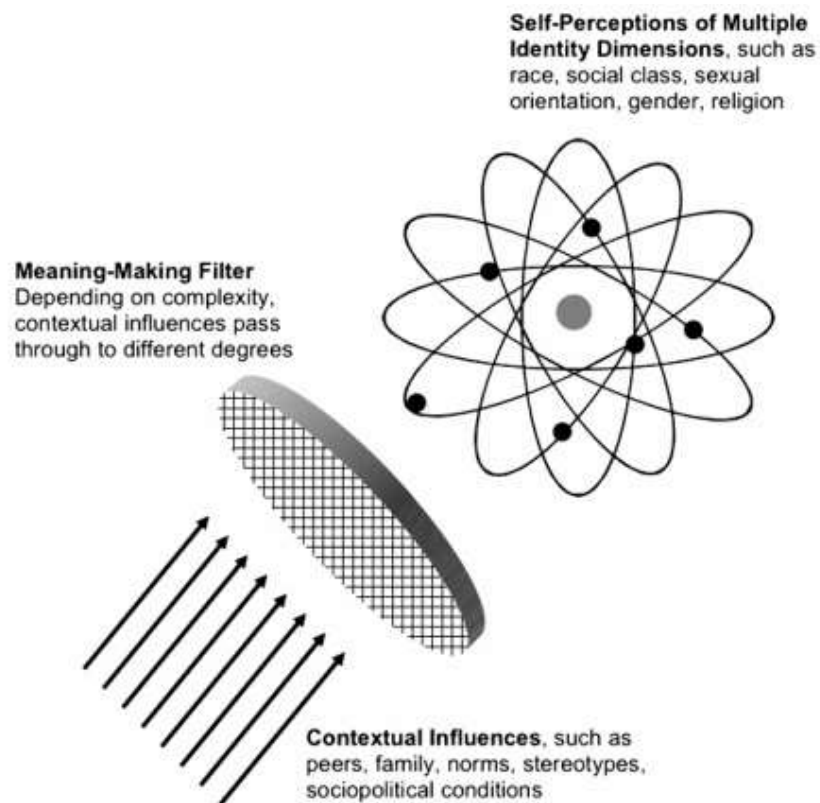
Jones and McEwen (2000) stated that identities are dynamic, ongoing and influenced by changing contexts – for instance, a male leaving home and attending

college may experience contextual influences that change his self-perception and cause him to assess the multiple components of his own identity. While Jones and McEwen's (2000) model provided a basis for a broader understanding of self-perception and multiple identities – allowing for recognition that each aspect of perceived identity cannot be understood in isolation – it does not incorporate issues of identity performance or self-authorship that are so vital to individual development.

Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) redeveloped the MMDI created by Jones and McEwen (2000) and introduced the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI) to incorporate meaning-making capacity into the model. Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) used Baxter Magolda's (2001) concept of meaning-making as the filter through which students articulated their own identity. According to Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007), filtering contextual influences (e.g., peers, family, norms, stereotypes, etc.) through a meaning-making filter to ultimately influence self-perceptions of an individual's multiple identities (Diagram 2). The filter allows contextual influences through at a rate directly tied to the complexity of the person's meaning-making capacity. Jones and Abes (2013) noted that “regardless of differences in meaning making, and the corresponding differences in the permeability of the filter, identity is always shaped within contexts” (p. 105). So a student with less complex meaning-making capabilities was more strongly influenced by external contextual influences. On the other hand, students with a more complex meaning-making structure are better equipped to filter out external influences, therefore maintaining separation between external expectations and internal realities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). In other words, according to Eaton (2015), “regardless of one's meaning-making capacity, social and environmental contexts

remain highly important” (p. 32). Many of the contextual influences that affect college men today are directly tied to the use of social networking – peer influence, social norms, and gender stereotypes are all defined for an individual in part by interactions on social networking sites. The contextual influences that are filtered through at different degrees and at different rates then directly influence the self-perceptions of students and contribute to a more holistic understanding of the individual.

Figure 2. Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity



(Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007, p. 7)

Jones and Abes (2013) re-conceptualized the model once again by introducing critical theories to their interpretations of methods of identity development. In particular,

Jones and Abes (2013) explored Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and Queer Theory, and the influence each has on individual meaning-making. Understanding intersectionality allows a student to “critically examine how intersecting systems of inequality shape individuals’ lived experiences” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 131). The concept of intersectionality results in a stronger understanding of how identities are inter-related rather than simply adding social identities to the list of phrases that define the student. Critical Race Theory “focuses on race and racism as central to identity and intersecting with other social identities” (Abes and Jones, 2013, p. 131). According to Eaton (2015), because race is a defining social characteristic and is central to lived experience, “there is never an opportunity to have a fully articulated sense of self that does not account for external interpretations of people” (p. 39). A limitation of pulling Critical Race Theory into the model is that it focuses primarily on race, which then overshadows other identities because perceptions based on race permeate our culture.

The third aspect that Jones and Abes (2013) explored was Queer Theory. Queer Theory “recognizes social identities as fused performatives” that are continuously changing based on context and which result in an identity that is “always becoming” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 131). Specifically, according to Eaton (2015), “Queer Theory seeks to disrupt normative understanding of gender and sexuality rooted in society’s structural privileging of heterosexuality and gender binaries” (p. 40). Queer Theory demonstrates that identity is performative, and “social identities as gender, race, sexuality, and religion are something individuals *do* rather than something individuals *are*” (Jones & Abes, 2013, pp. 199-200). The idea of becoming is an important component of how Queer Theory is part of the MMDI, and it suggests that individuals are

“endlessly transforming into some new form, meaning, or interpretation of identity (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 203).

Jones and Abes (2013) re-conceptualized the MMPI to demonstrate the fluid nature of identity development and the influence that external factors have on how students create meaning from lived experience. Context is vital to students as they interpret their experiences, and digital spaces – including social networking and social media – are playgrounds for experiences that are at the core of meaning-making for 21st-century college students.

Institutional Structures and Processes to Address Gender Issues

Colleges and universities are at the center of many gender conversations today, both in the classroom and outside the classroom. Curricular programs related to gender studies have increased in the last 30 years as academic research and theoretical understandings of gender roles in society have developed and taken center stage. Co-curricular programs such as men’s centers, women’s centers, orientation programs, and residential life programming have also grown around the topic of gender over the past 30 years as the student affairs profession has analyzed approaches to serving all students on campus.

While there is value in understanding the role that the college experience plays in assisting in gender identity development, Sax and Harper (2005) noted in a study of 17,637 college students (via the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey) that “gender differences observed at the end of college are largely unrelated to the college experience itself” (p. 21). Instead, the source of gender differences extends to

pre-college years, where men and women develop different values and patterns of behavior based on social expectation and pressures. Sax and Harper (2005) noted that the question for colleges to identify “whether particular college experiences can serve to mitigate the effects of the pre-college years” (p. 21). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), 56 percent of male students graduate in six years compared to 62 percent of female students, and from 1970-2010 the rate of females completing bachelor’s degrees jumped from 14 percent to 36 percent, while male students had just a 7 percent increase in the same time span. So what are methods that institutions can employ to help address pre-conceived notions of masculinity that students may have? Support of students through student service offices may be a feasible way to address gender roles on campus.

Gender Studies

Most gender-related programs are focused on the role of women. According to the National Women’s Studies Association (2015), women’s studies is an academic field that found its roots in the civil rights, student, and women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The first accredited course was held at Cornell University in 1969 and the first women’s studies program was established in 1970 at San Diego State College. In the early stages of the field’s development, the central question was “Where are the women?” – in essence, where were the women in business, education, etc., and why were men the most prominent figures in those fields. The NWSA (2015) noted that throughout time, the central questions in women’s studies have shifted to include “interrogation of identity, power, and privilege” (“What is Women’s Studies?” section, para. 2).

Men's studies can be viewed as the parallel to women's studies, focusing on theoretical frameworks of masculinity and male gender identity. While most course offerings focused on masculinity and male gender identity do not fall under formal curricular majors or developed programs, Hobart and William Smith Colleges now offers a Men's Studies program that combines courses from several disciplines to "explore theories of masculinity, the history and sociology of men's experience, and gender and sexuality" ("Men's Studies News," n.d.). August (1993) noted that, "Although men's studies is no longer a novelty on college campuses, it can still raise some bewildered eyebrows and prompt a few explosive reactions" (p. 15). And while men's studies courses may be on the rise, they still account for just one percent of gender studies programming (Dixon, 2010, p. 49).

Gender-Focused Centers

The movement to create men's centers was a response to the creation of women's centers and women's studies programs in the 1970s. Davis and Laker (2004) noted that men have been socialized in a way that has not necessarily encouraged them to think about themselves as gendered beings, and that idea has been the impetus for creating parallel programs to study masculinity through the lens of gender studies. Institutions commit resources to discussing men's issues on campus, though the trend of developing men's centers or focused male gender-related offices and departments seems to have stagnated. According to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrator's Men and Masculinities Knowledge Community, there are currently just six institutions with student-based men's centers on campus – located at the University of Oregon,

University of San Francisco, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, City University of New York, Western Illinois University, and Roger Williams University (NASPA, 2015).

Richmond College in Virginia provides male students with a designed program to help students think about and talk about masculinity. According to the institution, “Young men today face challenges in determining what ‘authentic masculinity’ looks like. Society promotes several conflicting images of what a ‘real man’ is or should be” (New, 2016, para. 9).

Gender and Orientation Programs

There are a few specific areas within the student affairs profession and student services realm that have received particular attention in regard to the conversation around gender. In particular, new student orientation programs have been a focal point for the gender conversation because of the educational opportunities presented when new students are together and becoming acclimated to an institution. Orientation programs provide an opportunity to articulate institutional values and cultural and social norms around gender. Orientation programs are created to assist both academic and social integration for students and are focused on the point of entry into the institution because of the impact that a structured system of support has early in a student’s education (Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989).

Barefoot (2005) noted that a Policy Center on First Year of College’s survey in 2000 showed that 96 percent of colleges and universities offered some form of coordinated orientation program for new students, which indicated that a vast majority of students entering college had an opportunity to participate in programs that were aimed at

vital topics related to student success, including social topics such as gender identity and inclusiveness. In addition, topics related to healthy relationships – both intimate and platonic – are important parts of orientation programs that assist students of all gender definition in making positive personal and interpersonal choices.

Gender and Residential Life Programming

Residential life programs have also been a focal point for the gender conversation because of the opportunities and challenges presented by having large numbers of students sharing common space and living with and among one another. Whether in single-gender or mixed gender (or co-educational) housing facilities, college students benefit from educational opportunities to learn about and discuss issues related to gender. Blimling (1995) noted that residence halls play a vital role in the educational process, involving students in outside-the-classroom learning opportunities that complement classroom learning. In *The Resident Assistant: Working with College Students in Residence Halls*, Blimling (1995) outlined approaches to gender-related topics in residential settings. The key conversations facilitated by residence life staff begin with basic concepts of gender and sexism (e.g. roles in society, historical context, view of power and privilege, etc.) and evolve to include conversations about sexual harassment and sexual orientation. Most institutions with residence life structures incorporate programming models, which aim to create and implement both social and educational events that allow students to get to know one another, acclimate to life on campus or to life in a particular residence hall, and to enhance knowledge of social issues such as gender roles.

Sexual Harassment and Sexual Misconduct

A growing topic of conversation related to gender is the Title IX legislation coordinated through the Office of Civil Rights and the Department of Education. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance. Title IX has risen to the surface of campus conversations more recently through gender discrimination and sexual misconduct policies as mandated by the United States Federal government. The White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault released a report in 2014 that indicated that one in five college students' experiences sexual assault during their college career (p. 2). The American Civil Liberties Union estimates that 95 percent of rapes on United States college campuses go unreported (n.d., para. 2). The Department of Justice statistics show that 62 percent of sexual assaults are perpetrated by an intimate partner and another 21 percent are perpetrated by an acquaintance, indicating that not only are comprehensive sexual harassment and sexual misconduct policies on campuses a necessity, but conversations about healthy and consensual relationships is a vital part of education on college campuses.

Effects of Living Arrangements on College Student Experiences

While the focus of digital identity is on virtual spaces, a vital aspect of the college experience occurs when a student lives on campus in a residential environment. Face-to-face interactions and the contributions made to development by sharing physical space influences a student's ability to succeed in college and provides a set of cultural guidelines against which to measure how interaction on SNS and in virtual spaces affect

development. Research has indicated that living on campus creates opportunities for student learning and success (Astin, 1993; Blimling, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994; Scott, Livingston, Harice, & Cawthon, 2012). Opportunities for students to connect and engage in shared space on campus encourages development and significant research has been conducted that demonstrates the value of living on campus.

The residential experience provides an established community into which a student integrates (or does not integrate) and learns more about himself and how he interacts with community. Students in campus residential settings are more involved in campus activities and have an easier time forming meaningful relationships on campus than those living off campus (Astin, 1973; Chickering, 1974). Men have a specific set of challenges and experiences based on living in residence halls, and research has indicated that men have different experiences than women (Davis & Harper, 2012; Foste, Edwards, & Davis, 2012; Enochs & Roland, 2006; Jagers & Iverson, 2012).

Residential facilities were rooted in the English universities on which United States higher education was modeled and, according to Schroeder, Mable, and Associates (1994), residence halls were intended to be at the very heart of the educational enterprise. From the very beginnings of higher education in the United States, residence halls existed to supplement the “intellectual and moral” life of college students (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968, p. 42). Rudolph (1990) described residential colleges as “a tradition so fundamental, so all-encompassing, that to call it merely a tradition is to undervalue it. For what is involved here is nothing less than a way of life, the collegiate way... the

notion that a curriculum, a library, a faculty and students are not enough to make a college. It is an adherence to the residential scheme of things” (p. 87).

The development of residence halls and the philosophy behind residential education evolved throughout the history of higher education in the United States and was affected by major trends of the nineteenth and twentieth century, most notably the G.I. Bill and Title IV of the Housing Act of 1950. Schroder, Mable, and Associates (1994) pointed to the mid-twentieth century development of student affairs positions to oversee residential life as a turning point in the development of residential institutions, including the founding of the Association of College and University Housing Officers organization in 1952 to further professionalize the field.

Residence halls were primarily single-gendered until the 1970s, when many colleges in the United States began providing co-educational spaces (Gordon, 2010). Residence halls often began as single-gendered and eventually genders were mixed within a building but divided by separate floors or wings of residence halls. Willoughby, Carroll, Marshall, and Caitlin (2009) found that over 90 percent of college housing in the United States is now co-ed in nature. The most recent trend has been to offer mixed-gender or gender-neutral options, allowing students to select housing spaces without restrictions based on gender or sex (Zembriski, 2014). According to Zembriski (2014), 58 colleges across the country offer gender-neutral residence hall options as of February, 2014.

A number of theories and models have been created and advanced to explain the influence living in a residence hall has on the student experience. Both physical and interpersonal environments influence student learning and success in a residential setting.

Levine (1994) noted that “Students get an education in residence halls. [Students] develop stronger academic skills... They feel better about themselves, becoming more autonomous, having higher self-esteem and being more self-confident. [Students] acquire greater social skills, develop higher levels of moral development, and greater intellectual orientation” (p. 93). In a study of 245 undergraduate students, Kaya (2004) found that “higher levels of interpersonal closeness and feelings of connection among students in residential settings elicited better overall adjustment, social adjustment and institutional attachment” (p. 112).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) and Blimling (1993) concluded in their review of literature that living on campus was the single most consistent within-college determinant of the impact of college, with positive impacts on nearly all aspects of development. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) attributed this to the fact that “residential living creates a social-psychological context for students that is markedly different from that experienced by those who live at home or elsewhere off campus and commute to college” (p. 611). In addition, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) noted that “simply put, living on campus maximizes opportunities for social, cultural, and extracurricular involvement; and it is this involvement that largely accounts for residential living’s impact on student change” (p. 611).

Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) identified several positive benefits for undergraduate students living on campus. Compared to students who commute, students living in residence halls:

1. Participate in a greater number of extracurricular, social and cultural events on campus.

2. Interact more frequently with faculty and peers in informal settings.
3. Are significantly more satisfied with college and are more positive about the social and interpersonal environment of their campus.
4. Are more likely to persist and graduate from college.
5. Show significantly greater positive gains in such areas of psychosocial development as autonomy, inner-directedness, intellectual orientation and self-concept.
6. Demonstrate significantly greater increases in aesthetic, cultural and intellectual values, social and political liberalism and secularism (p. 39).

Blimling (1993) indicated that a majority of the literature on the influence of living on campus versus living at home and commuting to college takes a social-ecological theory. Educational environments influence and cause students to behave in certain ways and develop cognitive and non-cognitive skills in a social-psychological environment that is qualitatively different from the experience of those living at home or elsewhere off-campus (Schroeder, Mable, and Associates, 1994, p. 25). The hypothesis is that living on campus will maximize opportunities for social, cultural and extracurricular involvement, which will account for the impact of residential life on student development. Blimling (1993) also reported that while living on campus maximizes opportunities for learning, many earlier studies did not control for past achievements and performance and therefore it is inconclusive whether living on campus resulted in stronger demonstrated academic performance.

Astin (1993) completed a longitudinal study of approximately 500,000 undergraduate college students from 1,300 institutions and asserted that students living in

residential environments tend to have greater opportunities for involvement in educationally purposeful activities and programs outside of the classroom. Astin (1993) noted that direct benefits of living on campus included development of leadership skills, interpersonal abilities, job skills and cultural awareness. Research by Pike (1997) concluded the students' gains in learning and intellectual development are a product of three factors: involvement, interaction and integration. Living in a residence hall provides opportunities for all three: involvement in life on campus; opportunities for interaction with peers, staff and faculty; and opportunities to integrate in-classroom learning with out-of-classroom learning.

In 1991, Pascarella and Terenzini concluded that living on campus was the single most consistent within-college determinant of the impact of college and that conclusion remained after further research post-1990 (2005, p. 603). While Pascarella and Terenzini noted that evidence does not suggest a strong connection between living on campus and knowledge acquisition or general cognitive growth, but evidence does support the idea that change in cognitive areas is fostered indirectly "by maximizing the opportunities for social, cultural and extracurricular engagement" (p. 603). These opportunities tend to create an environment that encourages the advancement of student learning which is significant if, after all, the central intent and purpose of attending an institution of higher education is academic.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) focused on the idea that environment influences both academic achievement and socialization. Colleges are multi-faceted organizations which are rarely completely static in the approach to change. Residence halls and associated programs, therefore, need to remain multi-faceted – incorporating both

dynamic educational and social opportunities in which to engage students - in order to keep up with the changing demographics and changing needs of the institution. The environments provided in different halls allow for the opportunity for equitable growth and development for all students who reside in them. Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, and Associates (2005) found that those dynamic learning environments within the place of residence had a strong connection to the likelihood of making a successful transition to the campus environment, succeeding academically and having a fulfilling educational experience.

Pascarella and Terenzini reviewed research that demonstrated “the remarkably consistent evidence that students living on campus are more likely to persist and graduate than students who commute” (2005, p. 421). Research has indicated that students who live on campus are more likely to persist due to initial advantages (i.e., socioeconomic, high school extracurricular involvement, educational aspirations, etc.), but these pre-college traits are accentuated and amplified through on-campus residence. Liberal arts institutions have the opportunity to capitalize on opportunities for learning in on-campus living environments since most are residential in nature. According to *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, a vast majority of institutions who house 95 percent or more of the student body are small liberal arts institutions (“Most Students Living in University Housing,” n.d.).

In regard to philosophies related to residential education programs, Blimling (1995) identified multiple philosophies to working with students in residence halls. The *student affairs approach* “holds that residence halls serve to guide the educational experience of students outside the classroom” (p. 54). This approach acknowledges that

residence halls are part of the educational system and if social environments within residence halls can be enhanced, students who live there should have an “enriched educational experience” (p. 54). In addition, Blimling (1995) outlined the “student development approach” to residence hall programs, in which residential program goals include:

1. Acceptance of the belief that individuals develop in stages that are sequential, cumulative, increasingly complex, and qualitatively different
2. Acceptance of the student as the principal agent for change
3. A belief that the role of residence hall staff is to assist students in accomplishing goals that they have set for themselves
4. A recognition that one must consider the development of the whole individual, intellectually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually (p. 55).

The student development approach requires strong theoretical knowledge and a commitment to student growth and education outside the classroom.

Just as male college students and female college students have differing college experiences due to gender roles, societal expectation and socially-constructed stereotypes, life in the residence halls have differing effects on men and women. Enochs and Roland (2006) found in a study of 511 college students that men living in residence hall environments had a higher level of overall adjustment to college when compared to females. In terms of academic performance, Arbodela, Wang, Shelley, and Whalen (2003) found that men living in same-sex residence halls performed at a higher level than women who lived in same-sex residence halls.

Behavioral concerns also vary depending on whether living arrangements are co-ed or gender-specific. Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, and Castillo (1995) studied 28,709 students from a total of 140 institutions and found that living in a co-ed residence hall was a significant predictor of binge-drinking levels and a follow-up study by Harford, Wechsler, and Muthen (2002) found that more problem behaviors related to drinking were found in co-ed residences than in gender-specific housing. In a study of 510 undergraduate students, Willoughby and Carroll (2009) found that students living in co-ed housing were more likely to take behavioral risks than their counterparts in single-gender housing, including findings that individuals in gender-specific housing were less likely to consume alcohol and engage in binge drinking than students living in co-ed housing and that students living in co-ed housing were more likely to have more sexual partners in the last 12 months and also have more permissive attitudes toward sexual activity than students living in gender-specific housing (p. 243). Scott, Livingston, Havice, and Cawthon (2012) outlined a critical issue concerning men living in residence halls on campus. They asserted that “struggles with men’s privilege and the drive to succeed at all costs can sometimes be exhibited as negative behaviors (verbalizations, attitudes, and/or physical contact) toward women and men who are not similar to them” (p. 202). So while co-ed housing options have provided colleges greater flexibility to meet student requests, issues related to identity development and transition to college may be influenced negatively by co-ed housing options.

One area of conversation around gender and housing is tied to the concept of gender-neutral housing. Gender-neutral housing is defined by many institutions as men and women sharing the same residence hall room. Baumann (2011) noted that the

gender-neutral housing movement is the result of two primary issues. The first is a growing demand by students to have the freedom to choose with whom they want to live, regardless of gender. Another primary reason is increased interest in housing options by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning/queer (LGBTQ) community. Bauman (2011) noted that students argue that it is essential to provide safe environments for students of all sexual orientations, and gender-neutral housing may provide a level of comfort and security for those students. In addition, Willoughby, Larsen, and Carroll (2012) noted that a few primary issues emerged for institutions who have established or are considering the establishment of gender-neutral housing. The creation of gender-neutral housing assists in breaking down traditional gender stereotypes among students living on campus and allow for all students to be treated in similar ways. Gender-neutral housing options also provide men and women experience with one another, reflecting opportunities that students may find once they are no longer in college. Finally, Willoughby, Larsen, and Carroll (2012) noted that gender-neutral housing options now help address pragmatic housing issues – the creation of this option gives more students an opportunity to find housing suitable to their wants and needs, allowing students to be more satisfied with their experience on campus.

A variety of research studies exist on the impact that living in a residence hall has on the development of the undergraduate student, and it is apparent through analysis that living in an on-campus residential environment contributes to greater overall student development than not living in an on-campus residential environment. The continued rise of digital communication – resulting in the increased ability to communicate quickly and widely within and beyond the walls of a residence hall – adds a complicated layer to

this problem. Confusion and questioning during identity formation may be amplified by men's use of SNSs. Free and easy access to SNSs allow for the proliferation and glorification of negative behaviors, and the widespread sharing of photos, updates and commentary about those behaviors has an influence on other men in residential settings who are negotiating their own identity formation. While the research on the influence of residence hall life on college student development is relatively current, the more immediate emergence of SNSs and digital identity development have not allowed for a thorough assessment of how the latter informs a new understanding of the former.

Conclusion

The review of the literature demonstrates that men have difficulty formulating identity and integrating that identity appropriately into their social surroundings, and the addition of digital media obfuscates that development even further. It is concerning that gaps exist in the research regarding how and why college men use social media to communicate and to portray to others who they are. Women now enter college at higher rates than men and men are also more likely to drop out than women. In fact, female graduates account for about 60 percent of earned bachelor's degrees in the United States (Dwyer, Hodson, & McCloud, 2013). The growth of men attending college and persisting in college have stagnated, and it is imperative to research how and why men's development may be changing in the 21st century, with a focus on how and why men use SNSs.

Junco (2014) noted that "very little attention has been given to how social media influence student development, although these sites and services are central to the lives of

our students” (p. 95). It is evident through review of the literature that there is a need for research that explores the effects that SNS use has on both the cognitive and psychosocial development of students. Advances in communication – particularly through readily accessible and easy to navigate technology like smartphones and SNSs – create both opportunities and roadblocks in the progression of student development.

A majority of college student development theory is rooted in early 20th-century psychology and developed more thoroughly by the middle of the 20th century. External influences on college students – and, as a result, internal construction and comprehension of vital developmental milestones such as identity formation – have changed dramatically in past 20 years, and research is needed to demonstrate how recent rapid advances in technology have changed student development. In particular, it is of vital importance to understand how men are using SNSs to determine their identity and how they are (if at all) aligning personal values with online presentation.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study sought to analyze and understand the influence of social media use on male college students' gender identity and gender performance by employing a qualitative approach based on grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that the grounded theory approach generates a "theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process, informed by data" (p. 12). Glaser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Charmaz, 2006) advocated "developing theories from research grounded in data rather than deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories" (p. 4). The constructivist approach to the development of the research question and subsequent interview and focus group questions – in which participants co-constructed the data with me – made a grounded-theory approach most appropriate for this study.

Specifically, this study examined the role that social media use plays in how college men reflect on their understandings of masculinity, and how masculinity develops for digitally-connected and engaged students. Previous research on social media use by college students has largely been quantitative and has not yet focused on a thorough investigation of how social media use is understood and explained from the students' perspective. In addition, prior research has not investigated in-depth questions regarding how social media use creates and influences intersections between digital identities and male gender identity development. This study addressed a current gap in the research.

Central Research Question

An overview of the research design and methods of data collection for this study are presented in this chapter. As noted previously, a majority of traditional student development theories and gender theories were developed prior to the creation of social media, so there is a noted absence of discussion related to how college men use social media and how its use has an impact on how college men think about and perform their identities while in college. An area of research around this topic examined the how social media acts as a critical influence on male gender identity development in first-year students at a small, private, residential institution. With that in mind, the central research question that guides this study is:

How does the influence of social media use on male college students' gender identity and gendered performance affect first-year students and graduating seniors?

The central research question is rooted in the idea that the use of social media – a prevalent form of communication and connection for a majority of college-aged men – has some influence on the way that college men view themselves and their development as gendered beings, as well as how they choose to portray themselves in digital and non-digital spaces. The research question is rooted in queries aimed at understanding whether social media use interacts with male gender identity and performance, and if so, how and why do men choose to use social media in certain ways as related to their perception of masculinity. The specific questions that served as the foundation for the central research question were:

1. How do college men describe their behavior on social media and social networking sites?

2. What role do social media and SNS use play in the identity and experiences of college men?
3. How do college men articulate the intersection of male gender identity and digital identity?

The first question is an exploratory question to better understand how college men perceive their own use of social media. The second question probes more deeply into what role social media and SNS might play for college men, moving beyond simply an assessment of use, but a deeper reflection on the function of social media tools in their development as individuals. The third question explores how college men might see the two core components of the study interact - and whether there is a conscious understanding of the relationship between the two.

This study focused on “traditional” college-aged males currently enrolled in either their first year or their final year at the research site institution. Student demographic information beyond year in school and gender identification was not collected in any formalized way. The focus of this study was on gender identity and gender performance as it is tied to the use of social media, and while demographic information such as socioeconomic status, first-generation student status, or race may influence a student’s historical perspective on a particular topic, the focus of the study was on the commonalities shared by those attending the same institution at the same time and experiencing the same generalized social environment.

Beyond the guidance provided by the central research question, the methodology for this study was informed by a conceptual framework focused on established theories

related to identity development, specifically work done by Erikson (1968), Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007).

Erikson (1968) created a theory of identity development that focused on stages of individual psychosocial development, as outlined and addressed in Chapter Two of this dissertation. Perhaps most pertinent to the formation of questions for this research was the 5th stage of development, which was *identity vs role confusion*. During that 5th stage, individuals are grappling with who they are, what they want in life, and might be unsure of the direction of their future. College men who participated in this study were likely to be in the realm of that 5th stage of development, and potentially wrestling with some of the questions that Erikson (1968) put at the heart of his theory.

In addition, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) model of identity development was instrumental in understanding how students were progressing through stages of development. As outlined and addressed in Chapter Two of this study, Chickering and Reisser (1993) named seven stages of development in their model, including stages such as "managing emotion," "developing mature interpersonal relationships," and "establishing identity," that all played crucial roles in the development of questions and the approach to studying the college men who participated in this research.

Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) Re-conceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity was a cornerstone of the creation of research questions. Discussed in Chapter Two and shown in Figure 2, the model presented by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) provides a framework for understanding how experiences are filtered and processed by students as they work toward the development of their own identities. According to the model, the complex layers of individual identity formation

are influenced by various external forces, and this research proposed that one of those external forces in the 21st century is the use of social media. Not only is the presence of social media an external force influencing the development of identities, but it also provides a lens or filter for the individual student through which he may see the world, thus contributing a complex twist on the meaning-making filter.

Conceptually, this research was conducted under the assumption that social media use would act as both an external force on an individual male's understanding of their role on campus and in the world and as a filter through which his experience could be pulled or pushed in order to help make meaning of his experience. The premise of the research was that college men would understand and rationalize their own identities differently in their senior year than they did during their first year on campus, and that the influence of social media – as understood through the youth-normative perspective – would assist in the construction of meaning related to male gender identity and performance. Social media provides opportunities for engagement in constructed social networks, which in turn provide men a way to view and analyze their socially-constructed gendered identities.

Research Design

This study used constructivist, grounded-theory methodology, which Merriam (1997) defined as the development of a theory that emerges from the data rather than seeking data to support a hypothesis. This method of developing the hypothesis that is drawn out of the research is an inductive approach (Merriam, 1997). The research question was addressed by employing a grounded-theory approach, which aims to allow

the researcher to gather information from the subjects' perspectives, thereby "grounding" the study in the real world (Merriam, 1997). The qualitative research design for this study was needed to gain a deeper understanding of how men describe and articulate their perspectives on how social media use influences their identity development. Junco (2014) noted that qualitative research is largely absent within research on social and digital technologies used by college students.

Qualitative research seeks to understand how individuals create meaning around particular experiences (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) stated that "the qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences" (p. 1). A qualitative research approach provides comprehensive, holistic and inductive ways to analyze information and responses (Merriam 2009, p. 18). Qualitative research provides a "vivid, dense, and full description in the natural language of the phenomenon under study" (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997, p. 518). This exploratory, qualitative inquiry into how college men conceptualize their sense of masculinity through social media utilized three qualitative data gathering methods: semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and digital observations. This section reviews the study's design including defining the context of the study, population and sampling identification and technique, data gathering techniques and procedures, data collection instruments utilized, and methods of data analysis.

This qualitative research study focused on the experiences of first-year college men compared to experiences of senior men. While the focus will be on the experiences

of each group, a cross-sectional study was conducted in order to view and analyze data from a representative subset of the population at one specific point in time.

Context of the study

Data were collected at a small, private, highly-selective, four-year liberal arts college in the Midwest. Approximately 3,000 undergraduate students comprise the population of this institution, and the large majority of the student body falls into the traditional college student age category of 18-22 years of age. The student population is 99 percent full time, is 74 percent white/non-Hispanic, eight percent non-resident international and about 17 percent domestic students of color. Fifty-seven percent of students are female and 43 percent are male. The institution has a four-year residency requirement and about 95 percent of students live in on-campus, college-owned housing.

Identification of research participants

Potential participants were identified using a solicitation letter distributed via e-mail to all first-year and senior male students at the institution. An e-mail correspondence was sent to all first-year and senior male students by the Dean of Students at the institution in early October of 2016 to provide a notice to all male students of an upcoming study. The message from the Dean of Students served as an introduction to the recruitment process and provided a recognizable name that allowed students to see that the research was supported by the research site institution. A subsequent letter requesting participation was written and distributed by the researcher in mid-October of 2016. It was made clear in the recruitment correspondence that the researcher was not collecting data for use by the research site institution nor was the researcher acting as a

representative of the research site institution. See Appendices A and B for the Student Recruitment Letters.

This study identified participants through purposeful sampling to create a pool of student subjects from whom to collect information. A total of 2,800 students were expected to live in on-campus housing during the fall 2016 semester, and from that a typical sample was drawn to reflect the “average” male student who self reports using social media as part of his regular daily routine. A screening process was not used to determine social media use prior to the interview process, though participants were prompted with information in the recruitment e-mail that implied regular social media use (Appendix A). All individuals who respond were considered in the pool from which the sample was drawn. This method of purposeful sampling allowed for greater opportunity to gather rich data needed to contribute to the study. The intent was to generate as many potential sample candidates as possible, from which 10 first-year men and 10 senior men were selected based on order of response for individual interviews and six first-year men and six senior men were selected by order of response to participate in focus group interviews. A total of 186 first-year men received the focus group recruitment request, and 186 first-year men received the individual interview recruitment request. A total of 136 senior men received the focus group recruitment request, and a total of 135 senior men received the individual interview recruitment request.

Students were encouraged to participate in the study through the use of compensation in the form of gift cards or food. Each student who participated in the individual interview received a \$20 Amazon.com gift card for their time. Students who participated in the focus groups each received a meal purchased by the researcher. All

students who participated in interviews or focus groups had their name entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon.com gift card which was awarded after completion of all data collection.

All participants completed the University of Minnesota Informed Consent to Participate form (Appendix B) prior to any focus groups being conducted. Appropriate approval from the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board and the Institutional Review Board at the institution where students are being studied was obtained in September 2016, prior to any research being conducted or communication with any participants.

A total of 31 male college students participated in this study. A total of 10 first-year men and 10 senior-year men were interviewed during the individual, semi-structured interview phase. The number of participants for individual interviews was pre-determined but with flexibility so that adjustments could be made in order to insure that saturation of data was achieved. The 20 men who participated in individual, semi-structured interviews also completed a synchronous, digital observation immediately following the interview. A total of five first-year men participated in a focus group conversation, and a total of six senior-year men participated in a second focus group. All participants in interviews, observations, and focus groups selected or were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity. See Table 1 for characteristics of research participants.

Table 1*Characteristics of Research Participants*

Pseudonym	Group	Race	<u>Data Collection Type</u>	
			Interview	Focus Group
Christopher	First-Year	White	X	
Donald	First-Year	White	X	
Ethan	First-Year	White	X	
Felix	First-Year	White	X	
Lewis	First-Year	White	X	
Micah	First-Year	White	X	
Sheridan	First-Year	White	X	
Soren	First-Year	White	X	
Walter	First-Year	Asian	X	
William	First-Year	White	X	
Andre	First-Year	White		X
Anthony	First-Year	White		X
Jaden	First-Year	White		X
Jean-Luc	First-Year	Asian		X
Neil	First-Year	African-American		X
Bjorn	Senior	White	X	

Table 1 Continued

Pseudonym	Group	Race	<u>Data Collection Type</u>	
			Interview	Focus Group
Douglas	Senior	White	X	
Dylan	Senior	White	X	
Forest	Senior	White	X	
John	Senior	White	X	
Ken	Senior	Asian	X	
Miguel	Senior	Asian	X	
Ryan	Senior	White	X	
Stanley	Senior	African-American	X	
Wyatt	Senior	White	X	
Daniel	Senior	White		X
Josh	Senior	White		X
Peter	Senior	White		X
Sid	Senior	Asian		X
Timothy	Senior	White		X
Tom	Senior	White		X

Data Collection

Data were collected through three methods at one institutional location, referred to as Midwest College. Data were collected in October and early November of 2016. Methods of data collection included individual interviews, digital observations, and focus groups. The methods of collection created robust sets of qualitative data. The data collection was driven by a theoretical framework. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 suggested that digital identity formation is a vital component of college student development in the 21st century, and that college men face challenges with decision-making, behavior, and interpersonal relationships throughout the college experience, much of which is rooted in the confusion surrounding personal identity development around the topic of gender. The interview questions and focus group protocol were developed with these considerations in mind. These instruments were created in order to clarify definitions and to explore how college men understand their roles as men and their use of social media, as well as to allow for new knowledge to be uncovered by the researcher and the participants.

Focus Groups

Focus groups of students were conducted to gather data related to shared experience around masculinity, gender identity, and social media use on campus. Two distinct focus groups conversations were conducted to provide a social setting in which to discuss the topics central to this study. One focus group consisted of five male first-year students and a second focus group will consist of six male students who anticipate graduating at the end of the academic year. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) said that “focus

group interviews are well-suited for exploratory studies in a new domain, since the lively collective interaction may bring forth more spontaneous expressive and emotional views than in individual, often more cognitive, interviews” (p. 150). While semi-structured interviews allow for greater depth in reviewing how men use social media, a broader set of questions during a focus group conversation included asking men how they define and understand the concept of masculinity in relation to their own experiences requires college men to place themselves in the context of the experiences of other college men.

Focus groups are used to listen and gather information and is a way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Developed as an alternative method of interviewing, focus groups gather individuals to share opinions. Focus groups usually consist of six to 10 subjects led by a moderator, and is characterized by a non-directive style of interviewing (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Focus groups work when participants feel comfortable, respected, and free to give their opinion without being judged (Krueger & Casey, 2009). A potential limitation to the focus group method is that group interaction reduces the moderator’s control of the flow of discussion, thus potentially making transcription somewhat chaotic (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

The focus group questions were designed to uncover information about experiences on campus and ways that socially-constructed understandings of masculinity and gender on campus might connect with or be influenced by engagement on social networking sites. See Appendix E for focus group protocol. The focus groups began with brief introductions and warm-up questions to engage the participants with one another and with the topic. The group was then asked questions related to general social

media use and were invited to engage in discussion around the topic. The group discussion then shifted to masculinity on campus – how it is defined, how it is experienced, and how it is perceived – before shifting to the merging of the central component of this research: how social media intersects with male-gender identity development on campus. The group then participated in an exercise that involved looking at posts from various social media sites and analyzing them as a group to uncover ideas about how and why men post the way they do on social media sites. Posts were selected by the researcher to reflect stereotypical aspects of college.

Individual Interviews

After the initial population sampling, individuals were selected to participate in semi-structured one-on-one interviews. These interviews were conducted with 10 first-year students and 10 students who anticipate graduating at the end of the current year. A total of 10 of each population were selected to insure data saturation. Semi-structured interviews were used as a primary data gathering method to collect information from individuals about their own practices, beliefs, or opinions (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). In this approach, an interview guide is used, with questions and topics that must be covered. The questions are standardized, though the interviewer has some discretion in the order in which questions are asked and asking additional questions that ensure that the correct material is covered (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). The semi-structured interviews focused on the male students' perceptions of masculinity and their use of social media. Questions were generated to cover general topics related to social media use and masculinity. Three pilot interviews were conducted (two with senior students and one with a first-year male)

to refine questions. Pilot interviews were conducted to establish a baseline for duration of interviews as well as to strengthen the order and flow of questions. Input from the three pilot interview participants informed the creation of additional questions to use during data collection. Interviews were structured to build from introductory general questions to more complex, detailed questions about the role of masculinity on campus and detailed inquiry into the frequency and context of social media usage patterns. See Appendix C for detailed questions used in interviews.

The interview began with general questions to create rapport with the interview subject, including general social media app/site questions aimed at discovering frequency and type of usage. Questions then evolved into how the individual uses specific social networking apps/sites. After establishing a baseline of social media use and how the subject thinks about his use, the focus of the interview shifted to masculinity and the role that manhood plays on campus at the research site, and included questions about both how the individual sees masculinity and how he feels the general campus describes masculinity. The questions then brought the two central components of the research together and questions were be geared towards an understanding of how masculinity and social media app/site use intersect and how the former may inform the latter and how the latter may influence the former. Member checks were used throughout individual interviews to clarify language, meaning, and context in order to insure internal validity. Additionally, member checks were used as interviews were transcribed. Five first-year men and five senior men were given transcripts of their interviews and none of the participants who were provided transcripts provided feedback.

All participants completed the University of Minnesota Informed Consent to Participate form (Appendix B) prior to any focus groups being conducted. Appropriate approval from the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board and the Institutional Review Board at the institution where students are being studied was obtained in September 2016, prior to any research being conducted or communication with any participants.

Synchronous Digital Ethnography and Observation

The final form of data collection was the last part of the semi-structured individual interviews and consisted of analysis of social media use through a digital ethnographic observation. The same participants who agreed to take part in the semi-structured interviews conducted the observation after their interview. These observations are what Martinez-Aleman and Lynk-Wartman (2009) described as “synchronous ethnographic tours.” Digital ethnography involves observing behavior and interactions in digital spaces in order to tell a social story (Murthy, 2008). At the core of this method is the notion that what is visible on the digital screen is only part of the story, and an ethnographic observation allows for deeper understanding about how a college male produces and consumes digital content on social networking sites. This method aims at understanding the degree of intentionality with which college men use social media and how actual type and frequency of use compares with actual documented type and frequency of social media use. Ethnographic studies allow a researcher to enter the community of study to assess in greater depth and breadth cultural norms. This observation method allows for a synchronous ethnographic tour – to see what is actually

happening in digital spaces for students during the time that it is happening rather than reviewing past experience.

In conventional ethnography, a researcher immerses himself in the community he wishes to study, becoming familiar with the people and participates in routine activities in order to gain insight into the experiences of the subjects (Van Maanen, 1988). Benefits to traditional ethnographic research include opportunities for a holistic view of cultural systems, is highly flexible, and is a process of discovery to achieve emic validity (Whitehead, 2005). Whitehead (2004) defined emic validity as “understanding from the perspectives of ethnographic hosts through rigorous and iterative observations, interviewing, and other modes of ethnographic inquiry” (p. 16). Traditional ethnography does not account for computer-mediated communication but observing and researching digital environments acknowledges that the Internet is part of everyday life (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007). Social media and SNSs allow individuals to create digital communities that are as worthy of research as physical communities, though points of entry into the digital communities must also take the form of digital interactions. A research method growing in popularity and versatility is digital ethnography, a form of ethnographic study that ventures into digital spaces and analyzes the use, content, and meaning of digital cultures. Examining all aspects of an individual’s life – including use of SNSs and the Internet – allows researchers to contextualize any aspect of a subject’s life into other aspects of their life (Miller & Slater, 2000).

Digital ethnography is a valuable method for collecting information in digital spaces to tell a social story (Murthy, 2008). Though often used interchangeably and despite sharing similar traits, digital ethnography is slightly different than cyber

ethnography in that digital ethnography describes ethnographic methods which use digital tools but which is not limited to the online world and while it encompasses cyber-ethnography, digital ethnography is broader in scope (Murthy, 2011).

According to Murthy (2008), SNSs can be valuable to ethnographers in many ways, including the following:

1. SNSs are virtual gatekeepers with chains of friends who are potential research respondents;
2. SNSs contain vast stores of multimedia material regarding even the most marginal social movements or groups;
3. Ethnographers can “invisibly” observe the social interactions of members, gleaning previously unavailable type of ethnographic data;
4. Examining the structure of relationships built through SNSs (p. 845).

The participants involved in the semi-structured interviews participated in a synchronous digital ethnographic tour after their initial interview. See Appendix D for observation protocol. The synchronous digital ethnographic tour involved a prompt to get the research subject using his social media apps/sites. As the student viewed, scrolled, and clicked through a typical online experience during an academic day, questions were asked about why he chose to do what he did on those sites. During the 15-20 minute ethnographic tour, the observed student commented and reflected on his posts as well as the thought process behind each interaction in digital space. The participant had his voice recorded for transcription.

Limitations to digital ethnography are centered on ethical collection of data. While digital ethnography allows for observation of digital spaces, it can often be done

“invisibly” or covertly, raising questions of privacy and ethics (Murthy, 2008). This study included only active, interactive observation with each student.

Data Analysis

The constructivist grounded theory approach outlined by Charmaz (2014) guided the analysis of data for this study. Individual interview audio recordings and focus group audio and video recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher on a continuous basis throughout the data collection period. This allowed for deeper review and processing of the interview data as it was transcribed. Individual interviews were transcribed separately and on a continuous basis while other data was being collected in order to review for themes that could inform subsequent interviews and focus group questions. Following each interview, the researcher reviewed each transcript and added notes that reflected my reactions to responses as well as notes about the participants’ nonverbal communication. The use of memos was helpful in processing what the researcher believed was emerging from interview conversations. Analytic memos are used to “dump your brain” about participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation (Saldana, 2016, p. 44). Transcriptions of interviews, focus groups, and synchronous ethnographic observations were then combined for more formal coding. All transcriptions were entered and stored in Microsoft Word files for use during the coding process.

Individual interview transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative method, which is used to develop concepts from the data by coding and analyzing simultaneously (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The constant comparative method “combines

systematic data collection, coding, and analysis with theoretical sampling in order to generate theory that is integrated, close to the data, and expressed in a form clear enough for future testing” (Conrad, Neumann, Haworth, & Scott, 1993, p. 280). Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed that there are four stages to constant comparative methodology. Those four stages include “comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory” (p. 105). According to Kolb (2012), the researcher continually sorts through the data collection, analyzes and codes the information, and considers theory generation.

Using the transcripts of individual interviews, digital observations, and focus groups as data, I analyzed the data using coding methods developed by Charmaz (2014), which included initial coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding. More than 600 codes were generated during the initial coding process, which included line-by-line analysis of interview transcripts. Initial codes were not exact quotes from participants, but an attempt was made to align codes with exact language used by participants as much as possible. Examples of the initial codes included “constantly using,” “being popular,” “keeping in touch,” “observing peers,” “curating image,” and “avoiding controversial topics.”

The initial codes were done line-by-line in order to identify incidents within the data. Utilizing guiding language from Glaser (1998), the data was coded in every way possible in order to identify what was actually happening in the data and what the main concern was for the participant. Line-by-line coding allowed for verification and saturation categories. Once I felt that saturation was reached through the initial coding process, I categorized the initial codes into more focused categories, finding general

thematic or topical similarities between codes in order to cluster them in groups. The focused coding process provided an opportunity to group initial codes into broader categories accounting for concepts within each category. The focused coding process organized the 600 initial codes into 13 categories (see Table 2).

Table 2

Focused Codes

Controlling/curating content
Making social assumptions/expectations
Connecting to the past
Developing social connections
Understanding pre-college socialization
Understanding socialization at college
Defining masculinity
Establishing self
Feeling peer pressure
Understanding social context on campus
Understanding context on social media
Gendering of social media
Aligning values (In-real-life vs online)

Charmaz (2014) advocated for a more flexible form of axial coding in constructivist grounded theory, so axial coding was conducted to explore relationships

between the major categories and their various subcategories and how they interacted, intersected, and overlapped. This process was assisted through comparison with memos created during the data collection process, which included diagrams and word-mapping that provided insight into the relationships between concepts. The creation of a summary memo that outlined and described the subcategories from initial coding and the categories from the focused coding was also helpful.

Further refinement of the 13 focused codes listed in Table 2 led to the development of categories using gerund-based descriptors, representing an action-oriented phrase to classify participant responses (See Table 3). Charmaz (2006) defined the process of categorizing as an analytic step of “selecting certain codes as having overriding significance or abstracting common themes and patterns in several codes into an analytic concept” (p. 186). This stage of analysis – referred to by Charmaz (2006, 2014) as theoretical coding – narrowed the scope of the existing codes and provided action-oriented descriptors that informed the creation of the emerging theory.

Table 3

Theoretical Codes

Defining male gender identity
Defining social media use
Understanding audience/context
Defining digitized gender
Balancing physical and digital communities

The use of constant comparative analysis required re-visiting notes and transcripts to dig deeper into the meaning behind data, so early drafts of the emerging theory were often started, stopped, and re-started in order to adapt to changing interpretations of the data. Subsequent versions of the theory were developed when it became clear that students were communicating a relatively consistent description of their path of development through their time in college.

Researcher Perspective

The focus of this research came from the convergence of two very strong personal and professional interests. My experiences working with male students at small, private, liberal arts institutions have been important as I reflect on my own college experiences and have provided challenges and opportunities related to professional development as I have learned to serve male students more effectively in my roles on campus. In addition, social media has been a transformative social and professional outlet for me throughout the last decade, and I have spent a lot of time reflecting on what my college experience would have been like had social media been an integral part of the experience like it is today.

Merriam (1998) noted that researchers should clarify “the researcher’s assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study” (p. 205). As such, the researcher is able to identify biases, pre-conceived notions, and assumptions that could affect the research or data analysis process. I am currently an Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Residential Life at a small, private, liberal arts college in the Midwestern United States – a different institution than the research site institution. In

those roles, I have had an opportunity to work with college men in both positive ways (e.g., leadership positions, student employment, internships) as well as negative ways (e.g., significant conduct issues, vandalism, sexual assault). As a result, I have particular assumptions and beliefs about how college men behave and interact. I have a particular interest in how men communicate and acclimate to college life, and bring with me the assumption that social media plays a role in that process. I work on a residential campus, giving me an opportunity to work with men throughout their college careers, from the moment they set foot on campus as first-year students until the check out of their residence halls after commencement as seniors. As such, I have particular interest in observing how men change throughout their time on campus and understanding what influences that change.

I began using social media and social networking sites as a student affairs professional. Facebook had arrived on campus where I was employed and I started watching how students interacted in this new space. As I continued in my career, I used social media to engage with other professionals, share ideas, and connect with peers outside of normal professional development conferences. As a result, social media became perhaps the single most influential form of professional development I had as an administrator – connecting me to peers across the country and providing quick and easy access to resources as well as the ability to engage in dialogue about emerging trends and topics.

There were ethical considerations the researcher had to address before conducting research on male college students' social media use at the research site institution. The researcher discussed personal use of social networking sites with college students and the

potential existed to hear or see things that would be in violation of campus policy and/or state or federal law. There was also the potential to be working with data that was protected under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), so the researcher needed to be aware of identifying factors of subjects and the careful selection of what types of data used for analysis in order to protect individual rights.

The researcher worked to identify and acknowledge any preconceived ideas that may have affected engagement with this specific topic, or which may have influenced the interpretation of data collected. The process of acknowledging potential points of bias is called bracketing, which Fisher (2009) described as vital, “not for the sake of gaining objectivity by rather of acknowledging our engagement in the development of consensual (but always evolving) understandings of our research phenomena and processes” (p. 583).

Validation of Data

Validating data is one of the most critical aspects of qualitative research. The researcher utilized multiple methods to validate data collected for this study. Merriam (2009) discussed the idea of external validity by using the term “generalizability” (p. 223); that is, how readily could another researcher take data and apply it to another situation and find useful connections.

The first validation method the researcher used was reflexivity (Merriam 2009). This study involved a focused analysis of social media use, a phenomenon that has become fairly standard for both adults and young people. Each individual uses social media in his or her own way and has differing perspectives on the value and function of

social networking tools. Therefore, it was important to understand and articulate assumptions, biases and the personal feelings related to social media use and to be able to mitigate those concerns to ensure validity. Patton (2002) noted that a researcher's task is "first and foremost to gather data" (p. 405). Understanding the researcher's biases and assumptions and keeping the focus on gathering data above all else.

The second strategy for validation was member checks (Merriam 2009).

Undergraduate male college students have very different perspectives and opinions about similar digital experiences. Therefore, it was important to bring data and tentative interpretations of data back to the people involved to determine if it is plausible and to ensure validity. All attempts were made to create an open, trusting relationship during interview session, and the researcher asked follow-up and clarifying questions throughout each interview to ensure accuracy. Participants had their viewpoints summarized and had an opportunity to validate and affirm accuracy (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Additionally, the researcher addressed validity by achieving triangulation by comparing data collected during the interview, the synchronous digital ethnographic observation, and focus study phases of the research (Anfra, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This research study explored the influence of social media use on male gender identity and male gender performance among college men. Specifically, the study asked the question, “*How does the influence of social media use on male college students’ gender identity and gendered performance affect first-year students and graduating seniors?*” The exploratory questions that guided the development of the central research question were:

1. How do college men describe their behavior on social media and social networking sites?
2. What role do social media and SNS use play in the identity and experiences of college men?
3. How do college men articulate the intersection of male gender identity and digital identity?

This chapter provides detailed information regarding the themes that emerged from the data collection using participants’ responses to create thick descriptions. This chapter will lay the foundation for further discussion in the following chapter, in which the implications for colleges and universities – and for student affairs practitioners in particular – will be discussed. The results of the analysis will primarily be discussed in order of data collection method. Individual interviews and digital observations will be discussed first, followed by data collected during focus groups. Because the central research question focuses on a comparison between first-year and senior-year experiences, the analysis is primarily organized by discussing first-year participants followed by senior participants. A brief overview of methodology is provided followed

by an extensive analysis of data organized thematically by the major categories that emerged during the coding process.

Overview of Individual Interviews

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 10 first-year men and 10 senior men. The interviews provided opportunities for in-depth conversation about being a man, social media use, and campus culture around masculinity. The individual interviews lasted approximately 35-45 minutes for most participants. A primary concern was building enough rapport with participants in a short amount of time that they would be willing to share detailed thoughts on the role of masculinity and social media in their lives – both through their own up-bringing, their experiences, and their perspectives on their situation within social constructs of campus. The topic of masculinity had the potential to bring up difficult topics from the past. Several participants described tense relationships with their father, experiences with bullying by other men, and challenges to their personal identities because of socially-constructed norms around “being a man.”

Overview of Synchronous Ethnographic Tours

Following completion of the semi-structured interview, each participant also completed a digital observation in real time. Each observation took approximately 15-20 minutes. As detailed in Chapter Three, Martinez-Aleman and Lynk Wartman (2009) called this type of observation synchronous ethnographic tours. This observation, which is a form of digital ethnography, allowed me to investigate with the student their actual routine and patterns of social media use during a typical session. The student could scroll, click, and comment through a typical routine and would answer questions

periodically to help me understand their intent and purpose of each action. While discussing using of social media was a fruitful endeavor, actually looking through the participant's social networking apps and understanding their routine from their perspective provided depth that otherwise could not have been attained. In addition to depth, the observations provided context that either affirmed or conflicted with what I had just spent 45 minutes discussing with each individual during the interview, and led to additional questions and opportunities for participants to self-reflect and analyze what has become a daily, automatic routine for them. The 20 men who participated in the synchronous ethnographic tour primarily used mobile devices during the observation. A total of 18 men used mobile phone devices during the observation, and two men used laptop computers. The high rate of device usage demonstrated further evidence of the mobility of social media and the flexibility that students desire for social media engagement.

Analysis of transcripts demonstrated that the synchronous ethnographic tours allowed for an opportunity to see first-hand whether the participant's actual use of social media aligned with how they had previously described it in the individual interview. While participants were reminded repeatedly that I was not looking for any specific types of content nor was I interested in "spying" on details of their personal life, many of the men were protective of their devices. If a sensitive image or topic (e.g., photos of women in minimal clothing, pictures taken at a recent party, etc.) popped up, many of the men would scroll quickly past it or try to excuse its presence. The observation portion of the interview clearly demonstrated that rapid, continuous use of social media apps during a typical day is not abnormal. Many men commented that they had just checked all of their

social media apps before entering the interview, and that comment was supported when they would scroll through Instagram, for example, and quickly find the image they last saw during their previous session, indicating that they had seen all new updates.

A majority of the participants in both the first-year and senior groups noted during the observation that they utilized social media apps heavily during typical days, taking advantage of breaks in their schedule, the time when preparing for the day, meal times, evening time, and even bathroom breaks as prime opportunities for connecting digitally. Miguel, a senior, said “I use [social media] at like toxic levels. There’s rarely downtime when I’m not checking something. It really is just force of habit for me – like it’s there and I know it’s there so I check it.” Felix, a first-year, noted that while his use has changed slightly since high school, it’s still a pervasive part of his life. He said, “I don’t think I post quite as often as I did in high school, but I definitely check it more frequently than ever before. It is part of my day just like eating and studying.” When asked why he checks it so frequently, William, a first-year, said, “Well, I wouldn’t want to miss anything. That’s always a thought I have – what if I miss out on something that a friend posted or something that’s happening on campus or a news story? It’s not fear so much as just worry that I won’t be in on something cool or funny or interesting.”

Overview of Focus Groups

Two distinct focus group conversations were conducted, the first group consisted of five first-year men and the second group consisted of six senior men. The focus group conversations provided a social setting in which to discuss two topics – social media and masculinity – that are socially-constructed and defined by interactions. Therefore, it was

appropriate to allow for dialogue and social dynamics while discussing these two topics. The focus group format allowed for ideas about social media and masculinity to be introduced, gathered, dismissed, or countered. Krueger and Casey (2009) noted that focus groups work well when participants feel comfortable, respected, and free to give their opinion without being judged, so the location and room set-up were important factors in establishing a productive group conversation.

Much like the individual interviews, each focus group session moved through a set of initial questions about social media use, masculinity, and the merging of digital networking use and being a man on campus. The group setting allowed for a unique opportunity to witness the in-person manifestation of peer social pressure that the men were asked to describe in online settings. While both groups of men created an inviting environment for open dialogue amongst each other, there were moments of “feeling each other out” with answers and ideas. Very few men in either focus group were eager to take significant risks when answering questions. Perhaps that is the result of not having socially risky comments to offer up, but there was also a slight sense of trepidation with some answers that indicated a self-protective approach.

A portion of the focus group conversation was dedicated to viewing images taken from multiple platforms and discussing them in relation to perceptions of masculinity on social media, the details of which will be discussed later in this chapter. See Appendix F to view images used during focus group conversations.

Results of Data Analysis

As described in Chapter Three, data analysis included coding transcripts through constant comparative methods. Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined constant comparative method as the process by which the research continuously makes comparisons throughout the analytic process. For example, Glaser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Charmaz, 2006) discussed comparing interview responses within the same interview and then comparing interview statements between different interviews as a way to establish analytic distinctions. The participants in the individual interviews talked in detail about their personal experiences with digital social media, their experiences and perspectives on masculinity and “being a man,” and their impressions of how other men interact on campus at Midwest College.

Defining male gender identity

Defining gender identity can be a complex task. All of the participants in both the first-year and senior groups were asked about the social construction of masculinity at Midwest College. Masculinity as an aspect of identity is a socially-constructed concept that “encompasses the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are culturally associated with men” (Harris & Struve, 2009, p. 3). Defining male gender identity included articulating defining characteristics associated with masculinity through reflection on socialized, pre-college understandings of the terms as well as a reflection on more recent variations of the defining characteristics that are observed on campus. This section broadly focuses on how participants defined male gender identity, followed by brief sections regarding how participants defined masculinity at Midwest College and a section regarding how

participants described a shift in masculine identity through time. Findings from first-year participants is described first, followed by data provided by senior participants.

The initial question in the masculinity subgroup of questions in both individual interviews and focus groups was “When and how did you learn ‘how to be a man?’” The use of this question was asked at the point of transition from talking about social media use to a discussion of masculinity, and this particular question proved jarring for many participants. Variation of experience created dissonance for some participants, and several displayed moments of discomfort with having to define where and how they learned how to be a man. Several first year participants had not yet thought deeply about how pre-college definitions of masculinity were a part of their development. There was a clear understanding for many about the definition of “being a man” at college, but many also appeared to have compartmentalized that pre-college definition into something that they thought of only in the past, not how it was continually shaping their evolution of thought on masculinity.

First Years

Five of the first-year interview participants reinforced the assertion by Davis and Laker (2004) that college men have not been forced to think about themselves as gendered beings and therefore found difficulty in clearly defining their thoughts on masculinity as an aspect of identity. Donald, a first-year, said, “Learning to be a man is like learning a language – you can’t really pinpoint where you learned it or the details of how you picked up on it, you just pick it up as you go.” The idea of learning by observing was a theme that many of the men came back to as they reflected on their

development as men – often indicating that it was the first time they really reflected in an intentional way about where they learned “how to be a man.” Throughout the analysis, codes like “mimicking friends,” “observing family,” and “following social norms” provided insight into how behaviors associated with masculinity are passed along through social experience and how truly socially-constructed the definitions of masculinity are.

The first-year participants in particular struggled with how to define masculinity, comparing what society had taught them versus a perhaps more enlightened version that came from their experiences in the first few months of college. The senior-year men struggled with the juxtaposition, as well, though those students were quicker to draw upon knowledge they were acquiring about gender fluidity and the blurring of traditional gender roles, the result of conversations they said they have had at college. John, a senior, summarized this internal conflict through an anecdote about a relationship. In his interview, John said,

I remember being characterized by a former girlfriend as being more feminine, and I remember that clearly being a less-desirable trait. I thought it was interesting because there’s an ideal that’s perpetuated in media and on social media that this is the ideal man and sometimes those things like ‘he should care less about others’ conflict with the message of ‘be sensitive.’ Those two things don’t easily co-exist when you try to think about how you are supposed to be as a man.

The first-year participants identified a struggle to reconcile what they had learned about masculinity with what they were observing at college, and then expressed concern about how to then embody the traits they associated with “being a man.” William, a first-year student, said in his interview, “You kind of stay with the norm of what you see growing up. But words and actions are very different sometimes – talking about being a man versus actually doing things that show what you mean by it can be very different.”

Peers were a marked influence on participants in both groups, but most notably among first-year men. Many participants recounted stories of interactions with peers that shed light on masculinity and gender roles from a very early age. Neil, a first year, said the following in his interview,

I remember learning from a very early age the difference between a girl and a boy and how a girl acts versus how a boy acts. Like at recess, falling down, the boys had to toughen up and the boy can't cry. The urge was to cry but you had to hold it in because you didn't want to be viewed a certain way, even as a little kid in elementary school. It's so messed up. But a girl falls down and she could cry and receive help and attention. The girls could cry but the boys could not.

Seniors

The senior participants drew upon experiences at college that have helped shape their understanding of gender fluidity and breaking traditional stereotypes. John, a senior, discussed how experiences at college helped him understand the differences society places on gender regarding power and authority. John said,

The inverse of 'being a man' is often 'being a woman.' One is empowering and one has a negative connotation, so that's why it comes down to deciding whether you want to be a man in the societal context or choosing to simply be a gendered individual who is just like anyone else.

Tom, a senior in the focus group, discussed how a course in gender studies at Midwest College was the first time he contemplated his gender in any sort of tangible, real way. "I just happened to take a class on masculinity, and it opened my eyes to how I've sort of equipped myself to 'be a man' and how others might perceive me. It would have been a really good class to take as a first-year student." Pre-conceived notions of masculinity, often generated by experience prior to college, shaped the experiences that helped seniors define masculinity. The definitions they brought with them to college

informed the experiences that helped them analyze or shape an evolving definition of masculinity through their time at Midwest College.

All Participants

Several participants noted that influence of media on masculine development. Images portrayed in movies, on television, and on the internet left an impression on participants as they weighed social expectations in popular media with expectations being shared at home or at school. Micah, a first-year, said “We get bombarded with images in the media of what it means to be a man – the tough guy, the strong guy who’s muscular, gets all the girls, stuff like that. It can be a little overwhelming, mainly because it’s not the reality that any of us probably grew up with in our actual lives.”

Participants in both groups also frequently drew upon childhood experiences and pre-college social expectations to describe their feelings on masculinity. Participants often initially discussed the composition of their family when reflecting on where they learned about gender roles, relying on things their fathers, grandfathers, uncles, cousins, and siblings might have taught them or that they observed those family members doing. Aside from family, the list of influences included teachers, coaches, directors, advisors, and other authority figures. The tendency to believe that the strongest influences on masculinity were authority figures was not surprising because of the tendency to attribute role model status to those older or in authority positions. However, many of the participants revealed that where they may have learned the most about “being a man” was from peers – teammates, friends, neighborhood children, classmates, etc. While authority figures and older role models taught behaviors like “responsibility,” “being self-

sufficient,” and “treating others with respect,” teammates and friends often taught qualities like “sticking up for yourself,” “not leaving people behind,” and “not backing down.”

Perhaps one of the most illuminating elements of the conversations across both groups of participants around masculinity centered on the dramatically different descriptions that the participants used when defining what they felt it means to be a man. When asked to elaborate on “what it means to be a man” by providing descriptors or short phrases, the participants wrestled with societal expectations and stereotypes versus idealized images of what men, in their opinions, *should* be. For instance, phrases such as “caring for others,” “treating women with respect,” “fighting for equality,” and “being compassionate” were provided as responses. And, at the same time, responses such as “being cool,” “being big or muscular,” “acting tough,” and “appearing stoic” were used as descriptors. The word “tough” as a descriptor for masculinity was mentioned in 13 of the 20 individual interviews.

Defining Masculinity at Midwest College

A subtheme that developed was the distinct definition of masculinity at the institution of study. Participants were asked to discuss masculinity in specific terms related to their lives on campus, meaning that in addition to discussing pre-college awareness of masculinity and male characteristics, participants focused attention on observations and impressions of what it meant to “be a man” specifically on campus at Midwest College. Several first-year men commented that they were still too new to the Midwest College campus to give a thorough answer about what it meant to be a man on

campus, but had thoughts based on observations. The senior participants were predictably able to articulate how college influenced their ideas of masculinity and how men might be described at Midwest College more so than the first-year men.

First Years

The first-year participants talked about how they observed men on the extreme ends of the social spectrum. Christopher, a first year, referred to the extremes as men from “sheltered, religious backgrounds” on one end of the spectrum to the “wild guys” on the other end of the spectrum. Micah, a first-year, classified men at Midwest College as “either bros and athletes or [artistic] guys.” Regardless of where the men felt they currently fell on the spectrum created by those definitions, they expressed a peer pressure associated with establishing one’s self as a man on campus.

Walter, a first-year, said, “I definitely feel like there’s a certain pressure here to act in a certain way if you want people to see you as a man... to stand out as being ‘manly.’ I feel like you have to act tougher to make people know you are a man.” That pressure to act a certain way was emphasized by others, including William, a first year, who stated that there is a pressure related to social norms and peer perception when it comes to masculinity at Midwest College, “You stay with the norm. You never want to be the guy who falls behind on how you look or how you act.” Jaden, a first year, added,

Obviously you do have traditional men [at Midwest College]. But it’s also 2016 and men are talking a lot about what it means to be a man. Midwest College feels like the epitome of that, and I think a lot of colleges are places where these conversations happen. There’s a lot of conversation about gender – about the role of men, the power of men, how to treat women, do all men look the same, stuff like that. There’s definitely a strong presence of that traditional tough, strong guy that parties all the time, but it’s interesting to think that it’s changing a little bit.

Some of the first-year participants noticed that they have realized there can be a blend of stereotypes among men at Midwest College. Lewis, a first year, said, “Where I’m from, men are tough and a man is going to tell it like it is and he’s not necessarily going to be nice about it. I’ve picked up on here that you can be nice and be more passive and still be seen as a man.” Multiple participants attributed that blending of stereotypes to opportunities for discussion and coursework that have provided venues for reflection and seeing other perspectives. Felix, a first-year, said, “I think men here talk about privilege or have the opportunity to talk about it [in and out of the classroom] and to think about what it means to have the societal advantages that come with being a man.”

Seniors

The senior-year participants had a slightly deeper perspective on the role of men on campus at Midwest College. Several of the seniors talked about the push that many men at Midwest College make to be more open to non-stereotypical definitions of gender, even if beneath the surface are the assumptions they carry from their own development.

Dylan, a senior, said,

[Midwest College] is a fairly liberal school, so there is also some aspect of expecting men to be more sympathetic and open-minded to gender issues. So there’s an intellectually-open aspect of masculinity here. But expectation does not always meet reality – I think there’s still a very strong sense of gender and people outwardly say they are open-minded still have some subconscious little things that they do or say that do not align with open-mindedness about gender.

Ken, a senior, echoed Dylan’s comments about how the institution has influenced his perceptions of masculinity when he said he tries to emulate “masculine men,” while also striving for aspects that blend stereotypes. Ken said, “I like the idea that I could do all the physical components that are associated with masculinity while simultaneously

trying to reach beyond that into intellectual areas that aren't normally associated with masculinity."

John, a senior, said, "To be a man at [Midwest College] means that you are choosing how to display masculinity. College can allow for some gender freedom, so the definition of manhood fluctuates depending on the group dynamic." That nuance is indicative of the change that participants discussed over their time at Midwest College. The senior participants reinforced the notion that there is not one singular definition of masculinity, and adapting your perspective to be inclusive of multiple variations of masculinity that might differ depending on your particular environment – and that it can change from moment to moment – is indicative of growth and change. Dylan, a senior, reinforced that idea of change when he said,

I've had a fairly decent perspective shift since I have been in college. Personally I have realized that so much of the gender expectations we have are just culturally constructed and so being open-minded and having an emphasis on listening to other perspectives is what I've learned to do. So there's an intellectually open aspect of masculinity here.

Shifting Masculine Identities

Another subtheme that emerged when participants were describing how they defined gender was the way that masculine identities shifted and evolved throughout time in college. This particular subtheme focused on senior participants, who were able to articulate how their identities had changed during their college experience. The seniors discovered that they were able to articulate shifting masculine identities in college, meaning that the ways in which they defined their masculine identity changed over time at Midwest College. Several in-college factors were identified by participants as being responsible for that change. The senior participants in particular talked about a variety of

in-college factors that have influenced perceptions of masculinity. Coursework in gender studies provided opportunities for pedagogical methods that encouraged dialogue around gender. Participants noted that the typical Midwest College male student was fairly involved in life on campus – members of student organizations and clubs, athletics, intramurals, student government, etc. – and that the opportunities for incorporating broader perspectives outside the classroom had an influence on definitions of masculinity. Students at Midwest College are widely involved in musical opportunities – from formal ensembles to informal groups, music is a vital aspect of campus life, and provides an interesting lens through which to view masculinity for the participants. Living in residence halls also played a large role over time for the seniors, as discussed later in this chapter.

Ken, a senior, said, “There’s such a breadth of interests for men [at Midwest College], from musicians to athletes to [video] gamers, and regardless of those divisions we have a bunch of smart people that are willing to talk, for the most part, about things like gender stereotypes.”

Forest, a senior, also discussed how he learned in college that open-minded approaches to masculinity can have drawbacks, despite the positive assumptions about what those discussions can provide. Forest noted the difficulties that arise from the culture that surrounds open discussions of gender when he said, “This culture of hyper-analysis and that you can look into anything and find something to pick apart can be problematic and really keeps us on our toes here on campus... but people make mistakes and people say things, but it doesn’t necessarily make you a bad person or bad at being a man.”

Defining Social Media Use

This section will provide findings related to participant use of social media and social networking sites. The section focused broadly on how students defined their social media use, including a subsection related to the change in social media use over time in college. Data for all participants are discussed together in this section.

Due the ubiquitous social media use among participants, the men in the study struggled at times with defining how and why they use social media. In this study, students defined social media use in terms of function and purpose more so than in terms of frequency or duration. While not all students use multiple platforms, the use of at least one form of social networking on a regular basis was 100-percent for the 31 students participating in this study, and all participants had accounts on multiple platforms even if they did not check multiple apps regularly.

Among the first-year participants in interviews and focus groups in this study, 100-percent (15 of 15) used Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat on a regular basis. Among first-year participants, 46.7 percent (seven of 15) had a Twitter account, but only four of the seven who reported Twitter use said they regularly reviewed content and posted to Twitter. Among senior participants in interviews and focus groups in this study, 100 percent (16 of 16) reported use of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat on a regular basis. Among senior participants, 50 percent (eight of 16) had a Twitter account, but only five of the eight who reported Twitter use said they regularly reviewed content and posted to Twitter. Other platforms or apps that were reported by individuals but not a focus of this study include Reddit, Tumblr, WhatsApp, and Kik.

In addition to having registered accounts on the above apps, the participants discussed their usage in terms of time spent on devices and on various apps. All interview participants were asked how often, when, and where they access social media apps or sites during their daily routine. Most answers were a variation of “Whenever I have down time” – which included walking between classes, while eating meals, in the morning before classes, and in the evening as a break during studying or before bed. Several participants perceived their use to be excessive and seemed to express shame or embarrassment that they used social media apps so frequently, which provided interesting insight into how culture has defined the importance of social media use and the value that our students perceive others place on these apps as a form of communication. The participants discussed the significant role that social media plays in their lives, yet several men expressed embarrassment that others – particularly adults in positions of authority – would pass judgement on them based on their frequency of use. Stanley, a senior, said “When *don’t* I access [social media] might be the better question. Seriously, I do all the time. I’m a little ashamed of it.” Forest, also a senior, said “I use social media a lot. Probably too much. It’s the first thing I do and the last thing I do every day.”

While frequency of use was an important part of the interview discussion and the synchronous ethnographic tour, the participants noted that they do not necessarily spend what they perceive as excessive amounts of time on social media during their daily routine. Participants noted that they use multiple apps in small bursts throughout the day, scrolling through feeds in five-minute segments of their day rather than carving out large blocks of time to spend online. Forest, a senior, discussed balancing the importance of social media communication in his life with doing all the other things a college student

has to do, and referenced the inability of some peers to control the time and energy they invest in using their devices. He said,

Some people take social media apps off their phone if they feel like it's getting out of control for them. But I don't like that idea that I have to so severely cut myself off... I'm like an adult, I should be able to not eat the whole chocolate cake that's sitting in front of me. I should be able to control how I use [social media] and how I balance it with things I do in my life.

Changing Social Media Use Over Time

Participants in this study articulated their sense of evolution in terms of social media and SNS use, meaning that the seniors described their use of social media differently than first-year students, and seniors acknowledged that they used it differently now than they did three years prior when they were first-year students. Allowing opportunities for men to reflect on their social media use in terms of comparing at different stages in their college experience was a fruitful exercise for the participants as well as for research purposes.

First Years

First-year participants described their social media use in stark contrast to the way that senior participants did. First-year participants focused on the make-or-break mentality of gathering digital connections as they entered college. First-year use was defined by participants as being a social endeavor, amassing connections and points of entry into social groups and cliques. The desire to establish an identity at college created tremendous pressure for participants. Jaden, a first year, said

I think as freshmen you are totally re-establishing yourself. You are thinking 'How do I want these people to think of me?' It brings up an interesting question – are you going to do stuff and post stuff to make people like you and does that stuff represent YOU? Are you going for masculine things to fit an expectation?

Are you going for things you believe in? I don't know, it's really confusing sometimes.

Will, a senior, said that as a first-year student he vividly recalled “just stacking up friends and connections [on social media] simply because I could and because I thought it made me look better. I absolutely just did it for the optics of it – to look like the cool guy who knew everyone on campus.”

The need to establish one's presence on social media on campus was important, and one of the digital vehicles for that was the use of Facebook. First years repeatedly mentioned making frequent use of the institution's “Class of 2020” page on Facebook. The page is set up as a way to connect incoming classes and the presence of similar pages is common at institutions of all sizes all over the country in 2016. The intent is to provide a digital space for students to congregate, meet one another digitally, ask questions of one another, and receive updates and information from the institution prior to starting classes in the fall semester. The first-year men repeatedly discussed the value that the page played in their transition to college, helping them see who else was planning to attend and, as more than one student recalled, “creep” on their prospective roommates to find out who might be a good fit. Jean-Luc, a first year, said

Freshman year is such a confusing new start. Like when you're a senior in high school, you basically have this metaphorical chair whenever you walk into the building. You have this position that you've established and you know that's where you sit. When you get to college, you come in and think about whether you'll be able to find that chair, if you have to find a new chair, or if you even have a chair at all. And you have to re-establish yourself and decide which side of you that you want to show. I think when that happens – that re-establishment – that's when you revert to some of the stereotypical masculine things that have defined you or that you think could help.

First-year students described fears of misuse of social media and fears of missing out if they did not use social media – a combination that they described as imposing a social pressure on them to do things the right way, though “the right way” was nearly impossible to define. First-year students described a fear of being judged by others during a crucial period of time when favorable judgment is perceived as crucial.

Anthony, a first year, said,

I’m just so worried about being judged. Anytime you put yourself out there, it’s an opportunity for feedback from judging eyes. I follow such a wide spectrum of people, including people I’ve met like once or hardly know and I think about what they are going to think and what impression they will have of me. It’s like this crushing pressure to get it right. I want to post more often, but I can’t afford to do it in the wrong way.

First-year students framed many answers around concepts related to digital citizenship education in high school. Even though the students were just two to three years apart in age, there was a definite difference in how they spoke about education they received and conversations they had in high school related to appropriate social media use. Many of the first-year participants noted that a primary concern about social media use were the consequences associated with posting questionable content that may be viewed by authority figures, the initial stages in understanding context collapse on social media. Will, a first-year student, summarized this concept when he said “You don’t want to post anything that could get you in trouble or that would make people [like coaches and teachers] think badly of you.” The concern for consequences – for conduct repercussions, for judgement by those you admire, for embarrassment – weighed heavily on many of the first-year participants. Donald, a first-year, said, “The stakes are higher online versus in real life for most people. There are more negative consequences for what

you say online versus in real life because it stays out there. And we're told that a lot – that what you say stays out there forever.”

Seniors

The seniors who participated described similar concerns as first-year students, but were able to articulate a change through time. When asked about frequency of social media use, seniors indicated that they rely heavily on social media use as a means of communication and connection with peers more so than as a primary way of establishing a new identity and new relationships. Bjorn, a senior, described the initial fear that Anthony talked about, but explained the change over time when he said, “The online version of me now is much more eloquent and confident than when I was new to college. As a first-year, I’d take down a post if it did not get enough likes because of the fear of being judged for not being popular enough or for not posting something that would be seen as worthy of attention.” Miguel, a senior, said, “As a first-year student, I was definitely compensating for something with how I posted. Probably insecurity or worrying about fitting in.” Thomas, a senior, confirmed similar feelings when he said,

You have the reminders on Facebook about something that happened on that specific date in the past. A couple of posts from my freshman year pop up and I put my head in my hands. Over time I just post less stuff, I post less dumb things, and I’m a little more careful about what ends up on my social media.

Senior participants discussed their social media use in terms of curating a presence in digital spaces, a change over time from the initial need to establish a presence as first-year students. Ken, a senior, said, “I spent a lot of time as a freshman trying to be cool, but now [as a senior] it’s about trying to be cool just a little bit, but more focused on being an ambassador of my values and the values of this place.”

Seniors also discussed the importance of having unique aspects to their identity and finding ways to post about it online, which also changed over time. Douglas, a senior, discussed the changes in selection of content to share over time. He said, “When I was a first year, I used social media as kind of a journal... I thought if I could just aggregate everything in my life it would be a picture of who I am. But it got to be too much and wasn’t actually a good portrait of who I was.” Miguel, a senior, said,

I think most people just want to have their voice heard for 15 seconds. I have my own theories about scarcity in people’s lives – you post something for the reasons you choose to post it, but I’m not going to post something about the exact same topic as everyone else because it doesn’t set me apart.

Social scarcity presented itself in several interviews. While typically associated with economics, the idea translates to the novelty of interactions online. The idea of social scarcity is rooted in social psychology and states that humans place a higher value on things that are scarce, and a lower value on those things that are abundant (Mittone & Savadori, 2009). This philosophical approach to the curation of digital identities is an important step in the development over time of college men. Multiple participants described the digital “echo chamber” effect that occurs on social media when an idea or thought is reiterated repeatedly by expansive networks of individuals. The same thought, idea, or statement shows up on social networking feeds until it hits a point of saturation, thereby becoming less unique and given less credibility and value by the consumer.

Ryan, a senior, commented on cleaning up his audience in order to limit the echo chamber effect and create opportunities to curate a more unique self-presentation when he said, “I routinely prune up my friends, cutting back on who can follow me and who I

follow. I find that it lets me think more clearly about how whatever I post might get absorbed by others and the value that they find in what I post.”

Stanley, a senior who talked about “stacking up friends and connections” on social media as a first-year, articulated that he changed his methodology by his senior year. He said, “I started weeding people out and sorting out who I really wanted to be connected to. The looser connections became less important to me [on social media] and I basically started worrying only about relationships that mattered to me and less about how long my follower list was.”

Understanding Audience and Context on Social Media

College men talked about the challenges they face in determining context on social media, meaning that in order to be fully aware of the reach of a social media post, a student must decipher who makes up an audience, which parts of an audience might see which posts, and how those often diverse audiences may interpret content on social media. Comprehending the complex web of social network connections is challenging, and the men in this study acknowledged inconsistencies in how and when they thought about their audience when posting.

Participants were asked about their perceived audience on social media sites, and their answers ranged greatly, with some focused on who the specific audiences might be (peers, parents, professional connections, etc.) and some individuals only focused on whether the content they post would be liked by the audiences, not necessarily who made up the audience. The first-year participants focused more on whether audiences would like posts or engage with a post while the seniors were more intent on posting content

that represented their values or that they knew their audiences would like because they were more confident in who their audience was. Uncertainty about audience may lead to context collapse, and Marwick and boyd (2010) found that individuals who struggled with navigating multiple audiences had difficulty balancing expectations of authenticity and self-censorship. Collapsing contexts led many first-year students to be primarily concerned with popularity above the desire to sift through potential audiences to create content appropriate to each context.

First Years

First-year students were more concerned with gathering the social capital that is equated to likes and engagement on their posts. Micah, a first-year, articulated the primary concern about what impressions an audience would have when he said “I’m worried that [a post] won’t get responded to well. I can tell a Snapchat picture is successful is I get a few screenshots, and with Instagram if I get anything past about 40-50 likes I know it went well. On Facebook if I get more than 50-60 likes, I know that post went over well.”

Seniors

Seniors were more thoughtful in the curation of their online presence, articulating the broad audiences they perceive. Wyatt, a senior, said

I think I understand that there are lots of people who might see what I post who have different relationships with me, but I don’t know that I think about trying to be specific to each one. I see it as just one big, giant network. I guess I get that employers look, professors can look, people who I don’t even know could see stuff, but I don’t really think I am so concerned that it keeps me from adjusting my [social media] use at all.

Bjorn, also a senior, reiterated the focus on understanding that multiple audiences exist when he said, “I mostly maintain a presence [on social media] geared toward my peers, but I also now try to be cognizant of those other groups that are probably looking at and reading those same posts.”

All Participants

A central component of understanding context and audience is the awareness of an “online presence” versus an “in real life” (commonly referred to as IRL) presence. An aspect of social media use that many college students struggle with is deciding how to align online and offline versions of themselves, and whether there is value in aligning the two. Students have agency in determining if the online version of them will be similar to the IRL version or whether it will be a masked persona or identity created specifically for online interaction. The participants in this study indicated that they recognized that there was a distinction between the two, they did not necessarily indicate that they felt an overwhelming pressure to distinguish between online and IRL personas. Likely a result of evolving technologies and pervasive use of social media, the lines between IRL and online presence are blurred. Instead of seeing online persona and IRL persona as two distinct identities, the participants indicated that one was part of the other. Sheridan, a first-year, noted that “We talk a lot about ‘physical life’ or ‘in real life’ versus ‘digital life,’ but digital life is real life.” That analysis of the crossover between digital and physical persona was something the participants came back to a few times as they articulated the value of impressions online. Miguel, a senior, said, “I think everyone wants to think of themselves as someone with layers. There’s more to them than just one

thing, and I think it's so important how we decide to show that on social media because whatever audience you have might only have that as a way to determine what they think of you."

Digital Insecurity

A subtheme that emerged from how participants described online persona versus IRL persona was insecurity. Vulnerability was an aspect of social media use and identity development that stood out for both first-year men and senior men. There was a theme of insecurity related to the expression of stereotypically non-masculine traits that weaved through answers related to audience on social media. Some of the insecurity may be tied to masculinity, but much of it seemed to be tied to social pressure that comes with trying to figure out who the audience might be for online posts. The first-year men (and the senior men discussing their reflections on their first-year) discussed a fear of vulnerability – that being vulnerable was not a manly characteristic and therefore showing vulnerability in digital space was not ideal. Whether that vulnerability on social media took the form of expressing emotion, of articulating a fear or concern, or talking about a failure, the first-year men were afraid that being vulnerable would give the outside world (and perhaps more importantly, peers at Midwest College) an unfavorable impression of them as men. The senior men – whether subconsciously or not – still articulated some fear of exposing one's self as vulnerable on social media, but they had the words to articulate what vulnerability for them looked like, and many participants wore "the ability to be vulnerable when I want to" on social media and with friends as a badge of honor.

Wyatt and Bjorn, both seniors who participated in individual interviews, talked about how – as younger users of social media – they would remove a post if it did not receive enough engagement from their audiences. Wyatt said, “I would post pictures on Instagram and if it didn’t get 50 likes in the first hour I would take it down because it felt so embarrassing.” The pressure to appeal to an audience and receive favorable response was a source of pressure for participants, most notably for first-years but an element of that pressure certainly existed for seniors. Dylan, a senior, said, “There’s a pressure to be interesting and something that’s worth seeing online.” Miguel, a senior, said, “Before I post something, I go through the process in my head of thinking is this good enough to post online? Is it a good enough portrayal of me to put out there for all to see?”

Defining Digitized Gender

This section is focused on findings related to how participants described their social media use and social networking sites in general in terms of gender. This section also categorizes findings into subsections related to how participants cultivated an image of masculinity on social media and how participants shared lessons they learned about masculinity on social media. First-year participant findings are introduced first, followed by senior participant findings.

Social media use is inherently genderless, meaning that platform availability is open to those who identify anywhere on the gender spectrum. Social media posts are gendered by both the creators and consumers of content. Participants in this study were all aware of how they defined gender and were able to express how they most often able to recognize the gender that specific social media posts were targeted towards, but the

complex nature of aligning developing physical and digital identities created moments of dissonance and also learning opportunities for the participants in this study.

Brown (2016) defined “digitized selfhood” as “the extent to which individuals see their digital world selves as part of, or separate from, their physical world selves” (p. 14). Brown (2016) noted that the term infers that there is an integration of technology into student lives, though each individual may integrate it in different ways. The digitization of personal identity involves the digitization of gender identity, therefore allowing individual users the ability to construct and perceive digitized versions of gender. Social media content and engagement is a socially-constructed phenomenon, therefore it seemed appropriate that socially-constructed definitions of gender identity would rise to the surface of digital spaces and social networking platforms. The participants in this study discussed whether they thought of their social media audiences as gendered, and results were mixed.

First Years

An important aspect in understanding how and why men use social media is to recognize the role that other men play in shaping the way peers use it. Participants discussed peer pressure from a social standpoint, and that pressure was created by how participants perceived that other men used social media. Participants who recognized that other men on campus used social media to display their masculinity were more likely to use social media to cultivate an image of themselves as men. Walter, a first-year participant, found that his use of social media – and an examination of the content he consumes – provided insight into his own sense of masculinity. Walter said in the focus

group, “Social media has made me realize that there is more traditional masculinity in myself than what I thought there would be.”

As participants reflected on how their masculinity is presented on social media, they were asked to discuss the differences between how men and women use social media at Midwest College. The first-year men said they perceived gender differences in content, preferring to post content about sports and fitness more than they believe female counterparts did. In addition, participants said that they perceive that men interact with other men differently than they do with women on social media, defaulting to humor, sarcasm, and poking fun at one another more so than women do. Ethan, a first-year, said, “Something I see across my friend groups is a tendency to give tough love. Roasting each other on social media, stuff like that.”

Donald, a first-year student, said in his interview, “I’ve noticed that posts on social media from other men tend to have less emoji and less flowery language [than posts by women], and men are less likely than women to smile in pictures.” John, a senior, discussed the differences in social media use between males and females at Midwest College as focused on a difference in perception rather than simply language choice. He said,

A lot of guys here present themselves as successful, well-dressed, like they have it all together – and they do that both in-person and online. They present themselves in manly ways online, where women’s social media interactions seem more geared toward friendship. The assumption here is that guys should not care as much about social media as women – guys might seem self-obsessed or arrogant if they post too much. We definitely expect women to post more than men, and in different ways, whether that’s fair or not. If two women post a picture of them together and then a guy posts a picture with another guy, those two pictures are thought of very differently.

Lewis, a first-year student, had similar thoughts on the difference between how men and women use social media on campus at Midwest College. He said,

When men use social media to communicate with women or the content will be consumed by women, they try to curate an image of themselves more. If it's just for other men, I feel like they may not care as much but it's a different type of caring. For other men, it's "look at me, I'm the best" versus when men present to women it's "look at me, I'm desirable."

The use of social media is shaped by perspectives on masculinity. The ways that participants accepted socially-constructed definitions of masculinity and the social norms associated with gender stereotypes informed the processes participants use to engage on social media. Jean-Luc, a first-year, said,

You can't be masculine when you are alone in a room by yourself. It requires interaction and other perspectives. The same applies to social media – you can't be masculine as the producer of content if the consumer of that content doesn't perceive it as masculine.

As evidenced through comments by participants, both producers and consumers of social media content are influenced by social definitions of gender, and tend to engage with content based on those perspectives. And several participants talked about how they decided to shape the gender of posts based on what they assumed their audience would perceive. Anthony, a first-year, said,

Men have to follow up anything they think would be perceived as feminine by writing "soft tweet" or something, just like they have to follow up with compliments to other guys with "no homo." Girls don't have to do that – they feel more comfortable complimenting each other and being close to one another. Guys are so afraid to "soften" posts and forming and sharing really close relationships with other guys because of how others might view them and because of their preconceived notions of what a heterosexual male relationship should look like.

Seniors

The senior participants reiterated some of what the first-year participants observed. Forest, a senior, said in his interview, “I think men are more playful with other men on social media than women are with women. Like joking, posting more about random stuff than girls do.” The social jabs online that were mentioned by some first-year participants were also noted by seniors. Douglas, a senior, said in his interview, “I think men call each other out more [on social media]. I think men feel that posting online distances themselves from who they actually are, so they post things that they wouldn’t really say [in real life].”

Seniors also mentioned protective factors that differentiate the genders on social media, articulating more clearly than first years the need women have to be more socially conscious and aware of what they are posting. Forest said, “A lot of girls are conscious of the pictures of themselves they post because you get creepy guys commenting and stuff. [There’s a] general sense of freedom that men have online that women probably don’t have.”

Bjorn, a senior, said in his interview that men do not seem to post as frequently as women, nor reveal as much about themselves in digital spaces. Bjorn said, “I think men in general are encouraged to post less, fewer pictures, fewer status updates. That’s true here [at Midwest College].”

Gendered Images on Social Media

Perhaps the most insightful opportunity to hear from participants about their thoughts on gendered social media came from the focus group discussions about images

pulled from social media. The images were from actual social media accounts and were selected to portray an aspect of stereotypical masculinity in digital space.

The first image discussed by participants was from Facebook. The image was pulled from a popular account called Men's Humor. The image (Figure 3) is an example of a meme. A meme is defined as “an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media” (Merriam Webster, 2016).



The first-year men in the focus group described the image as humorous, and that it reminded them of media images they often see of men consuming alcohol. There was an immediate connection to the male in the bottom picture, with an assumption that it was a college-aged male, similar to males they may know from high school or at college. The first-year men agreed that the individual who shared it or posted it may not understand the reach of his audience, and it may not have been a wise idea to share such potentially-embarrassing support of alcohol use on their feed.

The senior focus group participants were more analytical in their discussion of Figure 3. The men commented immediately about the stereotypical image on top and commented that social expectation dictates that if men look wealthy and powerful and clean-cut, they are likely allowed to get away with behavior that otherwise would be deemed unacceptable. Multiple men in the group connected the images with current drinking culture on college campuses, including Midwest College. Sid, a senior, said, “It symbolizes going beyond healthy ways of drinking and that it’s cool to pass out and that it’s an okay part of being a man in our society.” While multiple senior men agreed that they may see this type of image on their Facebook feed, it likely would not be accompanied by personal anecdotes because friends have gotten smarter about posting potentially incriminating stories or evidence online as they’ve gotten older. And while multiple senior men noted that friends may post similar items for the humor, it does not necessarily mean others would reserve judgment if they saw this post. Tom said,

I don’t feel like I’d judge a friend for posting this, but you immediately have that flicker of wondering what their motivation is to share it with the world. And even though you’re not trying to classify them in a certain way, I notice things that my friends share and post and then compare it to how they actually act in real life.

The second image shown to each group was a Twitter post, as shown in Figure 4. The Tweet was pulled from the ABC News account as an image of what might be interpreted as going against a stereotype. The senior group was once again more likely to dig deeper into the meaning behind the post rather than just knee-jerk reaction to the image. The first-year group focused on the image itself and their immediate thoughts on what it might symbolize.



The first-year group assessed the Tweet as being a common tactic to lure readers to their page, but stated that the linked article likely would not get as much traffic as anticipated because the picture itself leads the consumer to understand what the story is

about. The senior men discussed their assumption that the account which posted the picture was attempting to actively work against stereotypes. Peter said, “Posting a large police officer with a tiny, cute puppy is subversive to expectations, which is why it’s a story. If a woman were in this picture, it likely would not elicit a similar reaction from us.” The participants also noted that the image in Figure 4 was not uncommon to see on the platform on which it was shared. Twitter posts are intended to quickly grab attention and pull consumers in to make a judgement. The senior men agreed that it was the type of post that would be seen on accounts of other Midwest College men. Sid said, “Men [at Midwest College] like to be ‘nice,’ and that requires men to perform in a way that makes them look cute. This picture definitely portrays that image and it gives people an impression of the type of social media you consume and it gives them an impression of who you are – or at least how you want others to perceive you.”

The third image shown to the groups is shown in Figure 5, and was pulled from a Snapchat account. This particular image was selected to demonstrate a stereotypically male post that is indicative of the nature of the platform – brief, humorous text accompanying an image that will have a brief existence before disappearing from the app for both the sender and receiver.



Figure 5. A Snapchat post. In this image, a male is exposing his backside to the camera.

The first-year group wrestled with the appropriateness of the post. While the men agreed that they found it humorous, they questioned how it's humorous if a man posts this but would be deemed objectification if a woman posted similar images of themselves. The first-year men agreed that they may see this type of post from friends, they would be hesitant to try to share the post or to talk about the post because they would not want their name attached to it in case they were judged by others.

The senior group assessed the image in Figure 5 as an attention-seeking tactic. A line of conversation that surfaced again during data collection had to do with establishing one's self as heterosexual while still be comfortable with non-stereotypical presentation of sexuality. Sid said, "This picture has a lot to do with how groups of men celebrate homo-eroticism but at the same time have that 'no homo' line. Taking pictures like that and establishing that this is still a heterosexual guy is really important to men."

The senior men noted that Figure 5 fits the essence of Snapchat. The image is contained to an audience that the sender selects and it disappears after viewing or within 24 hours if posted on a Snapchat Story. The temporal nature of Snapchat provides an opportunity to be a little more risky with images and text, which is a relatively common occurrence on campus according to the senior group.

The final image is shown in Figure 6 and was taken from an Instagram account. The image was selected as an example of hyper-masculinity and selected specifically because of how participants in individual interviews had discussed Instagram as a more artful, curated platform.



Figure 6. Instagram post. In this image, a man is biting the heart of an animal he has killed.

The first-year group had a more visceral reaction to the image, immediately declaring it offensively hyper-masculine and as a form of male posturing. Neil

commented, “It’s like those weightlifting videos you see, it’s just pure masculinity on display. Chances are even he thought it was disgusting, but he couldn’t help put it out there to show others how manly he is.”

The senior group viewed Figure 6 as a form of hyper-masculine posturing, as well, but one that is rooted in keeping up with social norms – in other words, as a way to relate to other men rather than as purely a way to shock others. The senior men expressed that it was not something they would typically see on a daily basis on Instagram feeds from students at Midwest College, but that it symbolized a certain level of pride in an accomplishment and in a masculine endeavor that has been curated on a platform that encourages developing a “brand,” or a type of image that is most frequently shared. Douglas, a senior in the focus group, described the image as “portfolio-esque” in quality – as something that would be catalogued as part of a curated digital presence.

Cultivating an Image of Masculinity

The participants in this study articulated their interest in and ability to cultivate an image of masculinity, meaning the intentional crafting of an image that exuded masculine tendencies within the continuum of stereotypes. Social media provided an opportunity to put one’s “best self” on stage for the public to view, and participants readily acknowledged the challenges associated with living up to external expectations of masculinity for the sake of popularity.

The presentation of self on social media is an important part of identity in the 21st century, and participants were inclined to discuss the role of the online self as they thought about the way masculinity played out in their lives. Douglas, a senior, said,

“Social media is a great way to express assets of yourself that otherwise might go unnoticed.” That included for many participants the opportunity to present themselves as masculine if they did not feel they had ample opportunities or a desire to do so in person.

First Years

As discussed previously, first-year men in particular view social media use in terms of social capital acquisition as they begin to establish who they are in college, and socialized concepts of masculinity often exacerbate the complexities of establishing and presenting one’s self in digital spaces. Soren, a first-year student, said, “Image matters. Popularity on campus equates to popularity on social media. The perception of who you are as a guy is a really big deal – it’s insecure and it’s narcissistic, but the pressure is real.” Struggling with defining masculine identity might inhibit social media use, and social media use might limit development as a man, creating an often confusing situation for first-year men. The cycle of confusion can lead many college men to experiment with identities to find which suits them best – a potentially healthy practice, though one that amplifies the need to understand digital context.

Christopher, a first year, said, “I think many men see social media as trying to fit you into a little bit of a box and trying to define you very clearly. Because of that, I definitely try to create a masculine vibe. But worrying about that box might make others feel more inhibited by trying to create an image of them as manly.” Trying to appear more masculine was a common theme for first-year men, including Micah, who said, “I definitely post things that will make me look more manly, more attractive, and well-liked.”

The desire to appear more masculine comes at a price for many college men. The confusion related to sorting through definitions of masculinity that are socially-constructed, observed, and consumed and then trying to create personalized understandings of masculinity lead to an interesting struggle when describing whether it is important to think about cultivating an image of masculinity on social media. The participants in the individual interviews often seemed to indicate that they were not concerned with cultivating an image of masculinity online, but would then describe a very acute concern for it as they talked. For example, Donald, a first-year, said,

I don't really think deeply about how I portray myself. Well, I definitely would not post something that would make me come across as effeminate or anything. I love music, but my tastes are heavy metal and rock, but I definitely wouldn't post something about being a fan of Taylor Swift or Justin Bieber because you are seen as effeminate if you like them. And I definitely find that I 'like' posts that are manlier. Maybe it's subconscious, but I do it.

Seniors

Senior participants had started to think about context and the value of posting stereotypically masculine content and how that reflected who they were as men. Bjorn, a senior, said in his interview, "I don't consciously think I post things specifically aimed at demonstrating masculinity, but I am very aware of when something I post deviates from traditional masculinity." Forest talked about how he has forsaken some of his desire to portray himself as masculine online because of the limited positive engagement it elicits. While he appreciates his masculine identity, there is a hesitation to portray himself too overtly because of how his digital contexts overlap. Forest said,

I do ascribe value to being a man, but it's complicated... it will just get taken the wrong way if I try to post too much manly stuff. You can get taken in any sort of direction on social media in terms of masculinity, and I think exploring how you

act when you don't have eyes watching you is where I'm able to express who I am more.

Other senior participants discussed how they have learned to balance their self-presentations of masculinity in order to be more appealing to multiple contextual audiences. Some participants categorized the juggling of various identities as a balancing act, alternating or mixing in posts that reflect all sides of what they perceive as their identity. Ryan, a senior, said, "[Social media] is a small window into my day-to-day more so than a crafted existence, but I do actively maintain a perception of being a man. If I post something about being excited about the Drag Ball on campus, I then will feel the need to post something about football just to offset it a little bit and cater to my audiences."

Forest, a senior, commented about the challenges in presenting all aspects of what he perceives as "being a man" via social media because of the ability for others to interpret things differently than he intended. Forest said,

I do try to be a strong person in all settings, but social media is something where I kind of neuter myself. Because being overly masculine could get in the way of a message I'm trying to send about what I believe.

The desire to manicure or shape masculinity was a comment made by multiple senior participants, with an indication that the external perception and pressure was the driving force behind making adjustments to what is posted. John, a senior, made a similar comment in his interview, saying "We still seek external validity for who we are by idealizing an image of masculinity online."

Sharing Lessons in Masculinity on Social Media

A subtheme emerged from the data provided when participants were asked to talk about what they have learned about themselves as men while using social media. The answers ran the gamut of possibilities – from having almost no impact on perceptions of masculinity to playing a profound role in their development as a man. The perception of most participants was that the stereotypical toxic forms of masculinity are at a distance from their own lives as college students. The participants acknowledged that toxic masculinity exists, they know individuals who display it, they see it on their social media feeds, but they work hard to distance themselves from it and avoid contributing content that might be perceived as hyper-masculine.

First Years

For some of the first-year participants, social media has provided an outlet that has contradicted pre-conceived notions of manhood and has been helpful in their own process of defining characteristics of masculinity. Christopher, a first-year, said, “I’ve learned how others process emotion and show it. I was taught that men shouldn’t feel emotion or show it, but then [on social media] you see other people say ‘no, that’s okay.’ So I have learned more about the gray area of being a man.”

Lewis, a first-year, said, “I’ve learned that not everybody has the same perception of the world or of what it means to be a man. Being able to look at the world through other people’s perspectives has been a good way to also view my own masculinity.” Using social media to view other perspectives that inform your own perspectives was important to several participants.

Donald, a first year, said, “I’ve learned that I’ll get more attention if I post a joke than if I post a political rant, so I’ve learned to mix humor and real thoughts so that they are perceived better by [my audience].” That pressure to think about what content will be most popular amongst audiences had several participants questioning motives and lessons learned on social media.

Seniors

Will, a senior, shared his perspective on the attention-seeking nature of many social media when he said, “I’ve learned that I really want to try to be myself as a man [on social media], but there’s a pressure to do things that will get some attention.” And that pressure to do things that will get attention often masks vulnerability. Miguel, a senior, said, “I’ve learned it’s all about ‘how vulnerable am I willing to be?’ on social media. And it’s about being careful about how much I’m putting out there [on social media]. You don’t want to put so much out there that you get hurt, and you don’t want to give the whole package away.”

John, a senior, referenced how social media has broadened his understanding of social issues. He said, “I’ve learned [through social media] about issues that arise due to gender – that men do dominate our culture and that gears my thinking toward how I act and what I share.”

The participants indicated that reflecting on their use of social media made them realize their own natural gravitation towards masculine tendencies – and recognizing that there is a spectrum of masculinity online, on campus, and in the world beyond campus. Micah, a first-year, said, “I’ve realized that [social media] has made my world bigger.

It's been cool to see how wide the reach can be, to connect with people from all over, and to see how it influences how you think about yourself.”

Balancing Physical and Digital Communities

Communities exist in both physical and digital space in the 21st century. This section is focused on how participants balance the realities of living in physical and digital communities at college. All participant findings are presented together in this section. A subsection related to how participants experience peer pressure as a result of being social in both physical and digital communities is presented.

The participants in this study described an active engagement in both types of communities, and found both challenge and opportunity in reconciling the relationship between the two. Approximately 95 percent of Midwest College students live in on-campus housing units. A full-time housing requirement provides ample opportunity for educational opportunities and community development, but also creates unique opportunities for identity development and social norming across the entire student body that may not necessarily be as present at other institutions that do not require students to live on campus throughout their time as students. Participant responses indicated a blurring of lines between in-person communication and digital communication related to on-campus living – that is, interacting in a residence hall and interacting on social media are not mutually exclusive, and the co-occurrence of the two may contribute as much (if not more) to social connection than either one individually.

Participants noted that living together on campus also exacerbated masculine tendencies for men, broadening the impact of social norms across campus. One

participant described the sense of masculinity in his residence hall by noting that the higher density of men in close proximity leads to a continuation of stereotypes. Walter, a first-year student, said, “When you put men into the same dorm together – a floor or corridor of just men – it kind of brings [masculinity] to the surface. In my dorm, I feel like men could be nicer, but they try to be more manly or masculine.”

Despite students being within close proximity to one another on a residential campus, participants discussed how physical location mattered little in terms of the desire to be connected and perceived necessity of social networking sites on campus. Douglas, a senior, said, “Being connected digitally is socially enforced here.” In other words, if you are not connected on social media, you may not be connected socially on campus. Due to the relatively small campus size (approximately 3,000 students) and the proximity to one another due to the residential requirement, students follow up on what they see – or do not see – online, and are aware if others are not connected.

Felix, a first year, affirmed the notion that social media is used frequently despite proximity to other students when he said, “Everyone checks [social media] constantly, like always, but it’s used a little differently because we’re all connected physically here on campus. It might be focused less on life updates and more on daily occurrences, observations of life on campus, or just for logistical purposes like meeting up at a certain time or place and sharing event information.”

Feeling Peer Pressure

The convergence of digital and physical communities on a campus like Midwest College created social pressure for participants in this study, meaning that because the

two environments interacted so intimately, pressure to perform in one space inevitably affected performance in the other. Students articulated frustration over the pressure associated with having to be constantly connected to digital communities, yet found great satisfaction with receiving attention from peers for being connected, which demonstrated a dissonance that is created by that social pressure.

Despite living close to one another on campus, the men expressed the presence of social pressure to be on social media, sharing information and details of personal lives, and connecting with other men – even if they just live down the hall. Douglas said in the senior focus group, “I think the pressure to use [social media] on campus is real. If you don’t show up in someone’s feed, you disappear.” Ryan, a senior, concurred with other participants’ thoughts when he said, “You might be kind of screwed if you don’t use social media here. It’s just that important to daily life for us.”

The pressure to use social media existed in slightly different ways for first-years compared to their senior counterparts. First-years described the need to be present and active on social media from the outset of their college careers, even if that caused insecurities. Felix, a first-year student, used the Facebook Class of 2020 page for Midwest College as he entered college as a way to make an impression and be noticed. He said, “Trying to create your presence with a new group helped me connect to people here, but at the same time I wondered if I would have just met them anyway on campus.”

First Years

First-year participants described the pressure to create a “highlight reel” that consists of only the highlights of daily life and usually limits the negative posts that

describe emotional, low points. Lewis, a first-year, said, “People definitely draw conclusions about who you are based on what you post, so there’s a pressure to do it right.” The social assumptions made by peers based on social media posts was described as a driving force for many participants as they thought about their social media use on campus. Micah, a first year, said that men – and male athletes in particular – seem to have a need to talk about themselves in digital spaces, and the act of self-promotion perpetuates some of the masculine stereotypes.

Seniors

Senior participants talked about being active on social media as a communication tool more so than a way to establish a personal identity. By the time the participants were seniors, they described that they had found friend networks and found their specific niches on campus, and therefore the pressure turned from social media being a source of social capital acquisition to a source of information and communication. The use of Facebook groups and group messaging apps was described as necessary for communicating logistical information and ideas among students and it’s something that Ryan, a senior, said “you *need* if you want to stay involved on campus.” Douglas, also a senior, agreed with Ryan when he said, “You cannot be a student here and have a healthy social life that introduces you to a variety of people without being on social media. I definitely have found that if I’m not on my phone at the right instant, my social relationships start to disappear.”

In addition to the pressure to *use* social media, participants were asked if there is a pressure to use social media in certain ways at Midwest College. Again, responses

differed and there was a noted difference between how most first-year participants answered compared to senior participants. Senior participants expressed the feeling of social pressure related to thinking about the next step in their lives and how to share that information on social media. Ken, a senior, said that he sees former Midwest College students who are now employed sharing updates about work and life and there is an implied pressure to post about job opportunities, graduate school plans, and other typical major “post-college” life events.

Summary

The 31 men who participated in this study opened up to provide detailed descriptions of their social media use and their experiences developing as men. Their development as gendered beings involved processing their own experiences to varying degrees – from pre-college assumptions to the social norming that occurred for them in their time on campus at Midwest College. Social media acted as a filter through which they viewed their own masculinity, and their digital identity and masculine identity developmental processes converged to provide a more holistic understanding of what it means to be a college male in the 21st century. Their identity development and performance included moving through various stages of self-awareness and social awareness, from pre-college understanding of identity to a more fully-formed sense of context in both their physical and digital worlds. The struggles that a typical male college student faces – and certainly the males in this study faced – developing their identity as men that co-occurs with challenges determining context on social media may impair the development of a digital identity that is consistent with in-real-life identities.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This final chapter discusses findings of this study in the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and then discusses the emerging theory of male gender identity and digital identity convergence in relation to this study's central research question. The chapter then outlines the implications for student affairs practice, provides thoughts on future research, and concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study.

This study focused on college men and the influence that social media use had on gender identity and gendered performance. The study was qualitative in nature, utilizing the constructivist grounded theory approach. Data was collected via individual interviews, synchronous digital ethnographic observations, and focus groups. In particular, the study was focused on how first-year men and graduating senior men viewed masculinity and social media use at a residential institution. Relying on literature related to identity, male gender identity and development, and social media as a beginning point for creating research questions, this study aimed to develop a theory related to the convergence of male gender identity development and digital identity development for college men. The research questions from Chapter 1 and the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 3 guided the process for analyzing the data collected from participants to develop the emerging theory.

The Theory of Digital and Masculine Identity Convergence

The emerging theory reflects the process through which college men develop their gender identity as it intersects with their digital presence on social media. As with other theories of identity development (Erikson, 1968; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), there is a

defined progression through stages of development resulting in personal growth and insight into self-perception and one's role in the world, and change occurs during the college experience and is the result of how men make meaning of their identities.

The data which informed the development of this emerging theory presented itself in the form of a progressive pattern of growth, which led to the construction of a flexible stage theory. Stage theories of development are based on the notion that individuals move through distinct stages over time. While the model has been created to demonstrate growth and change based on characteristics exhibited in each of the phases, the emerging theory is not intended to be a rigid pattern. The term "stage" may often imply rigidity when used in development theories, this emerging model uses "developmental phase" as the defining term for each point along the process of development to demonstrate flexibility. The developmental phases through which each student may pass along the path of development allow individuals to progress and regress, making the model more dynamic so as to reflect the dynamic nature of both evolving definitions of masculinity and digital identity. The dynamic nature of social media and in-college social experience – which have a significant role in how an individual develops a sense of identity while in college – requires a dynamic, flexible approach to interpreting how a student might move through the phases of the model. Individuals may spend a longer period of time in particular developmental phases of the model, and some individuals may progress and revert to previous phases.

The role of pre-college influences is a vital aspect of college student development, and in particular as it relates to socially-constructed identities such as gender.

Developmental psychologists describe a process of "proliferation and pruning" during

childhood and adolescent development that may explain how men formulate their understandings of masculinity from a young age, and provides a metaphor that applies to the way that men in this study described their college socialization and social media use.

Miller and Scholnick (2000) described the neurological phenomenon of proliferation and pruning by stating that “early in brain development, connections between neurons proliferate, but eventually are pruned. Connectionists describe pruning during the course of learning as cognitive competition” (p. 33). The brain is amassing connections and firing on all cylinders during development, but eventually the “survival of the fittest” mode takes over. Miller and Scholnick (2000) described the value of lived experience in this process by stating that “Experience shapes the brain by contributing to the pruning and forging of particular connections” (p. 252). Just as a child’s brain develops through adolescence by strengthening some connections and pruning others, college men adapt to college life and the development of their own identities through the process of collecting and cutting connections – both social and digital – as they formulate their sense of self.

The most striking data illustrated the change experienced by men through time, both in their development and performance of gendered identity and in their use of social media. Though the men in this study readily acknowledged their uncertainty about their own place in the perceived continuum of socialized masculinity, they all acknowledged awareness and participation in conversations around the topic of masculinity – whether through informal interactions, friend groups, or formalized classroom discussions. The perception of the continuum of a socially-constructed identity occurred over time, starting

with an awareness of a continuum as first-years to a relatively confident expression of where they fit on the continuum by the senior year.

The context for understanding masculinity and campus culture was provided and articulated by the participants, which provided a foundation for understanding the trajectory of development throughout their experience at Midwest College. As a researcher, I had knowledge of the research institution as a student affairs professional and outside observer, but the men who participated constructed for me the lived experience of being a man at Midwest College in the digital age, allowing for the framework for the emerging theory.

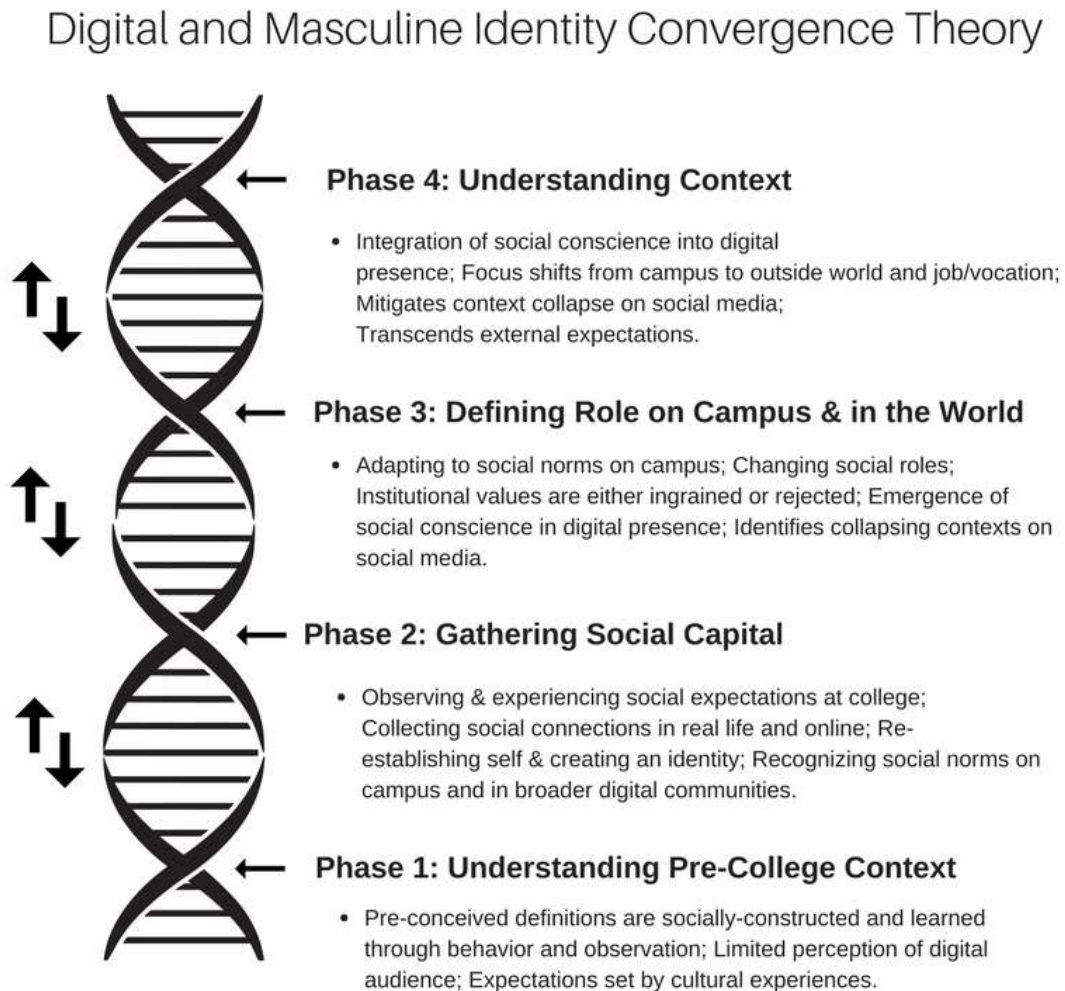
The theory that emerged from data analysis (Figure 7) focused on a process of change that ran parallel between male gender identity development and digital identity development, and resulted in the convergence of the two as social media use acted as both a lens and a filter for change. The data collected through this research provided evidence that a change happens during college in terms of social media use and how individuals describe their understandings of their gendered identities. The themes that emerged from the coding and analysis process provided the basis for the emerging theory. The core themes that emerged were: “defining masculinity,” “defining social media use,” “understanding audience and context,” “defining digitized gender,” and “balancing physical and digital communities.” The data that led to the formation of each of those main themes supported evidence of change from the first-year participant perspective to the senior participant perspective in a pattern that suggested growth.

The developmental process included understanding pre-college context and socially-constructed definitions of identity as a precursor to developing social capital in

college – both digitally and in physical interactions. Once social capital – in all its varying degrees – was gathered, men began defining their own roles on campus and beginning to see how they fit into the larger world through the lens of social media. Finally, men began understanding the broader context of both the physical and digital world, which includes shifting the focus from in-college experience to perceptions of the after-college experience and requires the mitigation of context collapse on social media.

The emerging theory is a staged model of development, and while the progression of most students is relatively linear through the phases, flexibility and fluidity exist because of the significant role that external experiences play on individual students. For instance, if a college male establishes social capital during the first and second year of college but has a significant falling out with friends or decides to change social groups as he enters the third phase of the model, he may revert back to the second phase as he begins the socialization process over. The model is designed as a blueprint for how the average college male may experience the convergence of digital and masculine identities in his life.

Figure 7. Digital and Masculine Identity Convergence Theory



Developmental Phase 1: Understanding Pre-College Context

College men were not always college men. The pre-conceived ideas of masculinity and social media use were generated pre-college through observing and experiencing socially-constructed definitions of each. Expectations about what it means to be a man are determined by cultural experiences and are most greatly influenced by their social surrounds and by portrayals in mass media. Men in the pre-college phase

typically have a limited perception of their digital audience. While these men make digital connections, there is typically a limited understanding of how broad the reach might be and a lack of accurate perception of the diverse audience that may see digital posts. The pre-college phase is defined by the beginning of the social “proliferation” process – amassing connections in digital and physical space as the individual man understands his role in his current context. As men pass through the initial phase and begin moving toward the second phase of the model, they are establishing themselves on campus and as male beings.

Developmental Phase 2: Gathering Social Capital

As college men, the participants noted that they had an opportunity to re-establish themselves as social beings. This reinvention often included the gathering of social connections and the beginning of a calculated presence on social media. Men enter the *establishing* mode of operation in this phase. Men in this phase observe and experience social expectations at college, learning social norms by being a part of them. The collection of connections are often influenced by the perception of what college life is like via social norms, and therefore has a significant influence on how these men begin creating their social and gender identities. In addition to recognizing social norms on campus, men begin interpreting social norms in digital spaces. This phase of development is highlighted by an amplification of the “proliferation” process, through which men gather as many connections as possible before beginning to sort through which connections might be more meaningful. The movement from the second phase toward the third phase is therefore may be characterized as *navigating*.. Men are sifting

through connections and understandings of who they are in order to navigate a social world – both online and in person.

Developmental Phase 3: Defining Role on Campus and in the World

Through observation and experience, men in this phase begin adapting to social norms on campus. As such, social roles change and men become more acutely aware of how they “fit” into campus life. Pedagogical experiences in the classroom shape identity and worldview as men begin to internalize discussions and other perspectives. Social experiences like living in on-campus residence halls and becoming involved in on-campus activities and organizations play an important role in developing a role on campus. Institutional values related to both masculinity and digital presence are either ingrained or rejected in this phase, particularly at institutions with a specific subset of characteristics (e.g. religious affiliation, HBCU, etc.). In terms of digital identity, men in this developmental phase display the emergence of social conscience in digital presence, limiting or eliminating connections contrary to personal values and enhancing connections that speak to the values they wish to convey to a broader audience. Men in this phase also begin to formulate a concept of social scarcity on digital platforms – understanding that the more unique or individualized a presence is, the more attractive it is to others and the more it stands out among many voices. Men in this phase also begin to identify collapsing contexts on social media, or the points at which multiple audiences come together and consume the same information that is being posted. Recognizing context collapse is a vital step in the “pruning” stage, where the most meaningful connections are sustained and the less meaningful connections are more readily ignored

or severed. The movement from the third phase into the fourth phase may therefore be characterized as *forming*. Men are intentionally forming connections and solidifying a sense of who they are as they begin to understand context in digital spaces and in person.

Developmental Phase 4: Understanding Context

The final phase of development involves an integration of social conscience into digital presence, where personal values about masculinity and social issues are more likely to align with social media content. This is a continuation of the process of *forming* for college men; shaping and aligning personal values in digital spaces and in person. For men in this developmental phase, the focus shifts from a campus perspective to the outside world and post-college opportunities, including job opportunities and vocational discernment. Men in this final phase also actively work to mitigate context collapse on social media, integrating their values into what they consume and post online. The final phase includes the transcendence of external expectations of masculinity through the recognition of assumptions about men and intentionally acting to break stereotypes.

Emerging Theory in Relation to Research Questions

This study aimed to understand the influence of social media use on male college students' gender identity and performance. In particular, this research investigated the differences between how first-year men and graduating seniors experienced and described the intersection of masculinity and digital identity in their lives. The central research question was: *How does the influence of social media use on male college students' gender identity and gendered performance affect first-year students and graduating seniors?* The initial research question was supporting by three broader

questions, which were: (a) How do college men describe their behavior on social media and social networking sites?; (b) What role do social media and SNS use play in the identity and experiences of college men?; and (c) How do college men articulate the intersection of male gender identity and digital identity? The intended outcome of this study was the development of a grounded theory rooted in the experience of the participants to provide a theoretical perspective on the intersection of gender identity and digital identity.

College Men's Behavior on Social Media and Social Networking Sites

The participants in this study appeared to be honest about their use of social media and social networking sites. The interview questions and focus-group questions used assumed that knowledge of gender roles and knowledge of social media and social networking sites was not new to men once they begin college – and the emerging theory confirmed that pre-college assumptions and observations played a key role in how college men adapt to their new environments (both digital and physical) and begin to articulate their identities while in college.

A series of questions were asked during all methods of data collection that were aimed at understanding how often, when, and where participants accessed social media during a typical day. The men seemed truthful about how frequently they used apps and about the function that each app played in their daily routine. Each of the 31 men discussed connections on multiple platforms, though some used particular platforms more frequently and with greater depth than other platforms. In addition to logistical answers focused on quantity and frequency, the participants described the way they used social

media and why they chose to do so. The answers provided by participants informed the creation of the developmental phases of the emerging theory. Responses to questions related to frequency and type of social media use indicated it was evident that *something* happened as they moved through college to change the way they approached social media use, and the analysis of the findings was focused on finding out exactly what caused the change.

This particular question formed the basis of the initial phase of the theory. Pre-college context was a significant contributing factor to how men thought about and described their social media use. How they used social media prior to beginning college set the course for how they assumed they would use it in college. And how they used social media prior to college was closely tied to their socially-constructed understanding of masculinity and the role that “being a man” played in interpersonal digital interactions.

A majority of the participants discussed how they utilized social media as a method of building social capital, which led to the articulation of the second phase of the emerging theory. Collecting connections and becoming known in digital spaces tied to life on campus was a vital part of the socialization process in college. Micah, a first-year student said in his interview, “Being seen as funny or cool is a pretty big deal for me. Reputation [on social media] really matters and I do think about what I post so that I get a good reaction.”

Behavior on social media changed, however, as men developed identities on campus, leading to the third and then to the fourth developmental phase of the emerging theory. Refining one’s role on campus and in the world came with experiences and opportunities and led to a shift in how the men used social media. As confidence grew

and social connections were enhanced, social media use became more about demonstrating personal values than it was simply collecting friends.

Moving into the fourth phase of the model, the understanding of context in digital spaces led to a refined sense of purpose on social media – maximizing messages that aligned in-person values with online values and creating and curating a digital persona that would ultimately benefit them beyond college. John, a senior, said in his interview, “My perception of who I am needs to be conveyed online. It’s identifying ‘these are your core values’ and that is what makes you who you are, so they have to align for me.”

Role of Social Media and SNS Use in the Identity and Experiences of College Men

The participants in this study discussed the significant role that social media played in their lives. Social media was the primary social connection for the participants. It was the lifeblood of their social experience because it fueled other aspects of life on campus for them – from small logistical details like when and where to meet peers for lunch to the dissection of social issues relevant to their lives in the greater world.

The first phase of the emerging theory was thereby informed by the espoused pre-college understandings of social media use. All of the participants utilized social media apps prior to enrolling at Midwest College. Just as pre-college concepts of manhood shaped how college men approached issues of masculinity at college, the definitions, boundaries, and value of social media and SNS use in the pre-college context played a significant factor in how men talked about the evolution of their use of social media in college and how they let SNS use influence their social lives and their identities as gendered beings. Neil said in the first-year focus group, “High school was a big [social

media] scene, and [social] drama was a big part of it. I definitely used it to connect with people, but it was less about making new connections and more about adding a layer to friendships that existed. It became just another part of high school friendships.”

Answers to the question about the role of social media use informed the formulation of the second phase of the emerging model. The second developmental phase of the emerging theory focuses on social capital, and amassing friends and becoming a known quantity on campus was a very important part of the Midwest College experience for participants, particularly the first-year men. Social media was often the metric used to gauge social success on campus, and the number of friends and likes gathered meant popularity and a reputation in real life. Ryan, a senior, said in his interview, “I used [social media] for friend-hoarding [as a first-year student]. It was about stroking the ego by collecting friends.” Soren, a first-year student, emphasized the role of social media in the increase of social capital when he said in his interview, “Popularity on campus equates to popularity on social media. The perception of who you are as a guy is a really big deal – it’s insecure and it’s narcissistic, but the pressure is real.”

Social media use in college influenced how men navigated their college experience. The participants repeatedly noted how the use of social media both helped and hindered their understanding of where they fit on campus which, by extension, influenced how they felt they fit into the larger world. This insight informed the formation of the third phase of the emerging theory. Participants noted that social media kept them aware of social issues on campus and in the world (e.g. national and global

politics, gender spectrum conversations, etc.), thereby informing how they chose to act amongst their peers.

Participants frequently noted that their use of social media kept them both connected to their roots and opened new doors for them, key aspects of understanding context, which is the fourth phase of the emerging theory. A connection to the past – family, friends, hometown news, and high school teachers - allowed a deeper understanding of how characters from the past are now different than characters in the present. All participants were also sorting through the localized context of campus, determining who on campus would see what they posted and how it would influence social lives, academics, and co-curricular involvement. The senior participants were very focused on the future, beginning to think about the additional contextual level of future employers, and determining what types of posts would make them more appealing than others. Ken, a senior, said in his interview, “We have one type of community here, but I might end up working in an ideologically different type of community [after college], so I have to be very aware of what and how I post things so that it doesn’t affect how I’m perceived [outside of Midwest College] or limit what I might be able to do when I leave here.”

Intersection of Male Gender Identity and Digital Identity

Social media use played a variety of roles for participants as they discovered their identities. For some of the men, social media use uncovered stereotypical aspects of their masculinity they did not necessarily know existed. Walter, a first-year student, said, “Social media has made me realize that there is more traditional masculinity in myself

than what I thought there would be.” For some of the men, social media use inhibited their desire to express a higher degree of masculinity. As noted in Chapter 4, Forest, a senior, said, “I do try to be a strong person in all settings, but social media is something where I kind of neuter myself. Because being overly masculine could get in the way of a message I’m trying to send about what I believe.”

While perhaps not previously thinking about how their masculinity and digital identity intersected, the participants were willing and able to talk about how they think about the convergence of the two in the context of college. Prompted by the questions in both the interviews and the focus groups, the participants often expressed surprise at how their masculinity might be perceived online.

The first-year participants were more likely than the seniors to have never thought about the intersection of the two identities, primarily the result of having pre-college context for each identity and not yet having to reconcile how the two interact. This data informed the first phase of the emerging theory. The first-year students drew primarily upon pre-college definitions of masculinity when categorizing their gender identity and were more likely to consider their digital identity as a separate entity from their gender identity. Ethan, a first-year student, said in his interview, “I don’t think I directly connect being a man to who I try to be on social media. I try to be well-liked and well-received, but it’s more of a social thing than it is about being a guy for me.” The senior participants reflected more deeply on the intersection of the identities and were able to articulate how masculine and digital identities converged as they grew more aware of and confident in their self-presentation. Forest, a senior, discussed how the connection between masculine and digital identities actually leads to a disconnect for him on social

media. He said in his interview, “I do ascribe value to being a man, but it’s complicated... it will just get taken the wrong way if I try to post too much manly stuff. You can get taken in any sort of direction on social media in terms of masculinity.” He added, “So I’m aware of my masculinity online, but I try to walk pretty close to the line so I don’t go overboard.”

The participants expressed a concern for vulnerability – weary of showing weakness on social media for fear of looking like lesser men than they hoped to portray. However, the fear of being vulnerable was also rooted in a fear of not being a successful college student (both academically and socially), so the fear of vulnerability is a prime example of a place where the identities intersect. The relation of that fear to the ability to gather social capital informed the creation of the second developmental phase of the emerging theory. The consequences of this concern were manifested through a guarded approach to showing emotion, limited sharing of intimate details of their personal lives, and the increased likelihood of sharing content that did not necessarily match characteristics they displayed in person.

There was a clear delineation between the level of recognition of the intersection between gender identity and digital identity for first-year men versus for senior men, indicating a change over time that occurs as men experience college. Social media was used by all participants to attract attention and collect friends, but the seniors were able to describe a change that occurred that enabled them to use social media as an expression of values and personal beliefs, including those associated with masculinity. This was both a result of defining their role on campus and in the world and, ultimately, due to understanding the various contexts they encounter on social media. This evolution was a

progression from the third phase to the fourth phase of the emerging theory. Despite the change in form and function between first-year and senior-year students, social media never really lost its importance as a form of self-presentation and as a platform to express gender performance, whether it was done consciously or not.

Connections Between Emerging Theory and Existing Literature

Chapter 2 detailed the reviewed literature that informed the creation of the research questions, data collection methodology, and the development of the emerging theory. In order to understand the nuances of the theory, a re-examination of the existing literature that informed its creation is necessary.

Understanding Pre-college Context

In order to understand how and why men come to view themselves as men, an understanding of pre-college context is necessary. Arnett (2001) wrote that socialization – the influence of family and friends and the surrounding societal norms – greatly affects how adolescents grow into adults, and participants quickly referenced those relationships as primary contributors to their emerging adulthood. As noted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, Brannon's (1976) "Boy Code" and Kimmel's (2008) "Guyland" illustrate the complexities of how men are socialized before they reach college, adapting to social expectations about their gender before they have opportunities to learn about gender from anyone beyond their immediate sphere of influence. Brannon's (1976) "Boy Code" included four principles, which serve as defining characteristics of the types of men in the world, all of which were discussed by the men in this study in some capacity. The four types of man outlined by Brannon (1976) include:

1. The Sturdy Oak: avoid vulnerability; stay tough and in control.
2. Give ‘em Hell: act aggressively to become dominant.
3. The Big Wheel: strive for achievement and success; focus on competition.
4. No Sissy Stuff: distance self from femininity and homophobia; avoid emotions (p. 12).

Brannon (1976) asserted that the “Boy Code” results in these four stereotypical methods of gender performance are socially embedded in young men. As a result, men arrive at college with preconceived and misguided notions of how to act as men because of messages they receive throughout their childhood and adolescence. That data from this research suggested that characteristics of all four of the types of men that Brannon (1976) described were present. First-year participants were focused on gathering social capital, and more likely to avoid vulnerability like The Sturdy Oak. While participants did not self-identify with the Give ‘em Hell character that Brannon (1976) described, they gave observations of peers who would act aggressively to become dominant or become popular. The participants referred often to avoiding femininity and avoiding overly-emotional social media posts, which fit Brannon’s (1976) No Sissy Stuff version of a man. Donald, a first-year student, said in his interview, “I definitely would not post something [on social media] that would make me come across as effeminate.” The fear of social repercussions for appearing feminine was a motivating factor for men so as to avoid the “sissy stuff.”

Kimmel (2008) reaffirmed that message by noting that masculinity is learned behavior. As noted in Chapter 2, Kimmel (2008) called his unique social sphere “Guyland.” The data demonstrated that participants in this study were living in

Kimmel's (2008) Guyland – the vulnerable and impressionable time when a man is transitioning from adolescence into adulthood. During that transition, external messages from peers, media, and society have a notable influence on internal processing about how to be a man. Social media acts as a companion through the journey through Guyland in the 21st century – digital relationships influence and shape how men perceive masculinity. Soren, a first-year student, said in his interview, “I think social media amplifies traits of what a man should be.” The amplification of traits are the result of how men post and the result of how men's pre-conceived notions of masculinity influence how they perceive and consume posts. Soren added in his interview, “You have all these messages coming at you about what's attractive, acceptable, and manly. It can be tough to figure out how that translates to how you should act in real life now that you are getting older.”

The transitions from childhood to adolescence and then from adolescence to adulthood are shaped by these social definitions of masculinity. When young men enter college, the new-found sense of independence and new social surroundings can compound the confusion around identity development. Edwards and Jones (2009) wrote that college men experience intense expectations about being a man and that the social expectations they face entering college include “being competitive, in control of emotions or unemotional, aggressive, responsible, the breadwinner, in a position of authority, rational, strong, successful, tough and breaking the rules” (pp. 214-215). In order to meet expectations from peers, Edwards and Jones (2009) said that college men “put on a performance that was like wearing a mask,” and that one participant in the study described his performance as “putting my man face on” (p 209). The participants in this

study did not use the term “mask,” but certainly identified ways that they masked who they were and knowingly altered the way they presented themselves in digital spaces in order to appear more masculine.

Gathering Social Capital

The second phase of the emerging theory is “Gathering Social Capital,” the next step in the socialization process for college students. As noted in Chapter Two, Matrodocasa and Metellus (2013) defined social capital as the emotional support, exposure to diverse ideas, and access to new information that are provided through social relationships and interactions. As the participants in this study confirmed, influencing social capital is a feature of social media use that directly influences development of identity. Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007) found that intensity of social media use predicted increased levels of maintained social capital, and the men in this study reinforced that by discussing how social media popularity was directly proportional to popularity on campus. Soren, a first-year student, said in his interview, “Image matters. Popularity on campus equates to popularity on social media. The perception of who you are as a guy is a really big deal – it’s insecure and it’s narcissistic, but the pressure is real.” The men curated social media profiles and posts in order to maximize how others perceived them, which in turn provided social capital. Gardner and Davis (2013) discussed this as asynchronicity and anonymity (or perceived anonymity) of social media, which allows students to strategically craft self-presentations.

Suler (2004) discussed the “online disinhibition effect,” which is the willingness for individuals to share more personal information in digital space than they may

otherwise do in person. While the participants in this study were inclined to think about specific types of information posted – particularly as they got older – they reconfirmed Suler’s (2004) theory by sharing that they did share information online in an attempt to collect friends and acquire social capital as they acclimated to college life.

Defining Role on Campus and in the World

By ultimately defining their experiences on a continuum of change, the participants in this study followed patterns of classic identity development theory. The difference in perspectives described by the first-year students compared to the perspectives of the seniors supported models of development that address a progressive, often-linear movement through stages of growth.

As outlined by Erikson (1968), the 5th stage of his development model focuses on “identity versus role confusion,” and participants consistently returned to this idea as they described their experiences as first-year men at Midwest College. In Erikson’s (1968) model, the focus in all stages up until the 5th stage are focused on what is done *to* a person, whereas the 5th stage depends primarily upon what a person chooses to do. Social interactions and “fitting in” play a vital role in identity development during this stage, which is also influenced by developing a sense of morality and determining right from wrong. That progression through the 5th stage of Erikson’s (1968) model was mirrored by the men as they entered the third stage of the emerging theory in this research. Those individuals who find success navigating Erikson’s (1968) 5th stage and navigating the 3rd stage of the emerging theory move through to develop strong affiliation with friends, causes and ideals – both in person and online. Individuals who struggle during this stage

experience role confusion, which can lead to experimentation with multiple identities and with a delayed ability to begin developing solidarity with others in the next stage of development, causing isolation. Connected to that idea is that the primary psychosocial task of adolescence is the formation of identity and maturation into adulthood inspires two identity questions that McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich (2006) noted: “Who am I?” and “What is my place in this world?” Those two questions are central to the “Defining Role on Campus and in the World” phase of the emerging theory.

A core component of defining one’s role in the world is making meaning of the experiences that shape identity. Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI) incorporated meaning-making capacity into their model of development by focusing on an individual’s ability to filter contextual influences. The filter allows contextual influences through at a rate directly tied to the complexity of the person’s meaning-making capacity. Jones and Abes (2013) noted that “regardless of differences in meaning making, and the corresponding differences in the permeability of the filter, identity is always shaped within contexts” (p. 105). So a student with less complex meaning-making capabilities was more strongly influenced by external contextual influences while a student with more complex meaning-making structure is better able to filter out external influences. A balance remains between internal capacity and external influence, and social media use is one of the vital influences in how today’s college students understand their identities and roles in the world.

A key component to understanding their role on campus and in the world required participants to reflect on their masculinity and what perceptions of masculinity meant to

them. Many participants noted that they had not necessarily thought about themselves as gendered beings, and if they had they had no internalized the stereotypical connotations associated with college men. The men articulated an awareness of the masculine stereotypes associated with college men, such as having “competitive heterosexual sex, drinking to excess, doing drugs, breaking the rules and not caring about or putting work into academics” (Edwards & Harris III, p. 47). The result of the stereotypical actions and attitudes are misogynistic relationships with women, limited relationships with other men and a loss of self – all things that the participants in this study confirmed with their responses. As noted by Laker and Davis (2002), college men often behave badly, and the negative stereotypes associated with college men were in the psyche of the participants during this research. The participants were quick to identify problematic behavior they observed, and were more likely than not quick to address how they craft their image to insure that others see them differently than the “typical” college male. The awareness associated with that process is also central to defining personal roles on campus in the world.

Understanding Context

“Understanding context” is the point at which students understand both their intent and purpose on social media, how it aligns with their individual expressed masculinity, and – perhaps most importantly – how to determine how to share content appropriate to specific audiences that may engage with them in digital space. This final developmental phase is the point at which a college male’s notion of self-presentation is in alignment with how the audience consuming his presentation online perceives his

masculine identity. boyd's (2010) "context collapse" – when multiple audiences collapse into a single audience and creates confusion and miscommunication for those posting to social media – is mitigated in this phase of the emerging theory. Marwick and boyd (2010) noted that the navigation of identities in different contexts as they collapse – and the ensuing management of self-presentation on a platform such as Twitter - can lead to inauthentic interactions and “an intrinsic conflict between self-promotion and the ability to connect with others on a deeply personal or intimate level” (p. 15). That collapsing of contexts makes it difficult for the user to understand the scope of the audience and makes it difficult to negotiate and manage interactions like one would in a face-to-face conversation. However, reaching this phase of development in the emerging theory means that men have created for themselves a consistent sense of self-presentation and therefore are able to limit the negative consequences of context collapse. Micah, a first year, said in his interview, “I think about who’s seeing [a post] and I try to cater to certain parts of my audience, like friends or family. There are definitely things I’ve posted that I wouldn’t want my mom to see, but I think my friends will like it so I post it.” Wrestling with seeing distinction between audiences and then posting according to intended audience is part of understanding context, and participants noted the challenges associated with this phase of the theory.

Perhaps more than in many facets of their lives, college men exhibit behaviors online that cause conflict with real versus perceived identity. The men in this study described accounts of their lives that aligned with Kimmel's (2008) description of how men act in “Guyland.” As noted by Kimmel (2008) and affirmed by the data provided by participants, men “rely increasingly on their peers to usher them into adulthood and

validate their masculinity” (p. 42). In addition, Kimmel (2008) noted that in “Guyland,” these “‘almost men’ struggle to live up to a definition of masculinity they feel they had no part in creating, and yet from which they feel powerless to escape” (p. 43).

Men in the “Understanding Context” phase of the emerging theory have reached a comfortable place in the “proliferation and pruning” process, and have started to maximize connections, trimming back insignificant connections and adding meaningful connections. Proliferation and pruning in developmental psychology (Miller & Scholnick, 2000) refers to the neurological process of amassing neural connections and then pruning back those that are less significant in order to maximize learning opportunities. Men in this phase of the emerging theory are involved in a similar process with digital connections – collecting friends before scaling back to maximize the value of specific connections.

Men in this phase of the emerging theory begin to transcend external expectations of their masculinity. Butler (1990) acknowledged the assumption that to perform identity, it is assumed that gender is socially constructed. A socially-constructed notion is by definition influenced by external expectations. The stereotypes, assumptions, and defining characteristics of a socially-constructed identity are created by others, mostly outside of an individual’s control. When men enter the “Understanding Context” phase of the emerging theory, they begin to recognize the aspects of their identity that are socially-constructed and will begin to consciously work against characteristics imposed by others as a more genuine self emerges.

Summary of Emerging Theory

The emerging theory provides insight into how and why college men use social media as both a filter for how they view the world and as a method of amplification of their lived experiences. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 provides context for the interpretation of the data and how it led to the creation of the emerging theory. The progression of an individual male student through the developmental phases of the emerging theory is deeply rooted in identity and context – understanding who they are and why they view the world as they do – and the literature and previous research supports what the data demonstrated. The emerging theory is designed to show how college men may pass through various stages as they experience college. While development theories based on interactions (e.g., Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) may provide opportunities for analysis of dynamic change, a flexible stage model is appropriate for the convergence of male identity and digital identity because, like other stage theories (e.g., Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1959; Kohlberg, 1969), change occurs over time throughout the college experience and the steps toward achieving the final stage are often incremental and linear. While this model allows for flexibility and regression, the progression through phases is aimed at a final phase of identity awareness. This emerging theory allows for a consistent analysis of how the college experience in the United States may influence masculine identity and digital identity. Cultural upbringing, depth of pre-college context for both masculinity and social media use, and socialization prior to arriving at college all factor into how a student may begin the phases, but college men experience the phases outlined in the model as they progress through their time in college.

Implications and Recommendations

A need exists to focus on integrating digital identity development into all aspects of student development. An important aspect of digital identity formation is digital citizenship education, something that many current students have experienced aspects of during their education. Digital citizenship education is an emerging field, particularly among those designing K-12 curriculum plans and those creating educational opportunities for college students. Curran and Ribble (2017) noted that “digital citizenship is not just a set of rules of what can and cannot be done online. Instead, digital citizenship is a comprehensive look at how individuals actively solve problems and participate in online platforms, communities, and networks” (p. 36). Curran (2012) described “the ideal digital citizen as an active citizen; not just a resident, but an enabler of change” (in Curran & Ribble, 2017, p. 36). Therefore, it is imperative that conversations around being engaged, active citizens of the world also include discussions related to social media use and behavior in digital space.

An opportunity currently exists to analyze the value and purpose of social media use in approaches to student development work, and this research reinforces the need to focus on integration rather than abstinence when it comes to social networking site use. The student affairs profession is at a critical juncture in terms of how we will choose to define technology use inside and outside of our classrooms. As history has proven, there are always generational divides in understanding and accepting technology, and it is incumbent upon student affairs professionals to assist colleagues in the integration of social networking tools into the work we do with students. In order to do this effectively with social media and digital identity, it is necessary for professionals to adopt a youth-

normative perspective. Cabellon and Brown (2017) encouraged a focus on engaging in constant education and reeducation around the latest technologies, issues, and trends in order to be up-to-date and knowledgeable when conversing with current college students. It is vital for educators “to be fluent in new technologies and be able to teach students how to use these technologies” (Cabellon & Brown, 2017, p. 16).

As noted in Chapter 2, Junco (2014) defined approaches to technology using the terms “youth normative” and “adult normative.” Junco (2014) described the adult normative perspective as a “prescriptive and authoritarian approach to understanding youth social media use” (p. xix) and described the *adult normative* perspective as a belief that “social media use ‘ruins’ young people’s ability to have ‘normal’ relationships” and that it often is reinforced by “media accounts of how terrible social media are for young people” (p. xix). Junco (2014) said that the youth normative perspective “attempts to understand young people's experiences through their viewpoint” (p. xix). Adopting the youth normative perspective would allow student affairs professionals an opportunity to see the value in integrating digital identity and social media tools into existing programs and leveraging student interest and expertise into creating innovative new programs that focus on blending the digital and physical aspects of identity.

Student development professionals often use a specific document from the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) to guide their work. ACPA and NASPA are the two primary all-encompassing associations for those working in student development in higher education, and in 2010 they jointly published (in consultation with the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education) a guiding document that outlined

the 10 primary competency areas for those working in student development. A revised edition in 2015 included “technology” among the core competencies for those working in student development, and this research reaffirms the growing need to place technology at the forefront of the work professionals do with students.

The technology competency is divided into three progressive outcome segments (foundational, intermediate, and advanced). Social media is incorporated into one foundational and one advanced outcome. Student development professionals are encouraged to thoroughly review the ACPA/NASPA document to understand how technology is changing the nature of the work done with students, and begin to infuse opportunities for discussions and education on social media and social networking – from etiquette to purpose to value – to insure the relevance and timeliness of their work with students.

Ahlquist (2015) advocated for early digital education interventions with students as young as 12-years old, though opportunities are not lost if such interventions occur early on in the college experience for students. The men in this study had established pre-college assumptions about the value and purpose of social media use, and early-college intervention – perhaps during new student orientation or during the crucial first six weeks of college – could both clarify pre-college assumptions and establish healthy social media habits that could provide long-term benefit to students and college administrators. A key to helping college students establish healthy social media habits includes frank discussions with students about moderating their use of technology throughout each day. Participants in this study classified their use of social media as constant, and some even described it as “toxic” to their daily routines. Discussions

among student affairs professionals in the early days of Facebook revolved around addiction and students staying up all hours of the night perusing social media. The challenge today exists in moderating the frequency of use – also an indication of an addictive behavior, and one that may have lasting effects on mental health. Mobile technology puts social media in the hands of our students at all hours of the day, and the frequency of checking for notifications is often a compulsive act that could interfere with time management skill development, attention in class, and social development.

A final piece of value provided by this research includes a re-imagining of how we understand student resilience. In 2016, the National Collegiate Health Assessment, a survey that had 80,139 undergraduate participants, found that 26.6 percent of all college students reported feeling “very lonely” in two weeks prior to the survey. In addition, 27.6 percent reported that other non-intimate social relationships were very difficult to handle and 29.4 percent reported that personal appearance had caused trauma or been very difficult to handle in the past year. Those statistics provide interesting insight into how social media might influence our students. Despite being more connected than ever before, social concerns and interpersonal relationships provide challenges just as frequently, if not more. In 2008, the first year that mental health questions were asked in the current format on the NCHA survey, 26.7 percent reported that other non-intimate social relationships were very difficult to handle, a small increase in eight years that coincided with the rapid increase in access to social media and social networking. Perhaps most interesting is that in 2008, just 22.9 percent reported that personal appearance had caused trauma or been very difficult to handle in the past year, which was notably lower than the rate reported in 2016. In a time when students have

unprecedented ability to control their appearance via social media – only sharing the things they choose to share and having the ability to curate a digital self-image – personal appearance is a growing problem. Leaning on resources related to resilience and growth (Dweck, 2008; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), student development professionals might assist students in understanding the complicated role that curating a digital image plays in their lives, and conversations and educational opportunities might reflect this important concept. Programs and workshops sponsored by groups such as student health centers, peer health educators, and residential life staff could assist in addressing these important topics. In addition, covering these topics in first-year seminar courses would also provide an opportunity to bridge academic and social experiences for students as they develop skills related to resilience.

Opportunities also exist for collaboration between student affairs professionals and others on campus around social media use and digital education. As student affairs practitioners continually seek ways to integrate in-classroom and out-of-classroom learning opportunities, there may be tremendous benefit to collaborating with faculty to discuss how and why social media use is applicable to both academic and non-academic settings. A significant aspect of identity for many college students is of an academic nature, and faculty have an opportunity to influence, shape, and continue conversations in the classroom that will benefit students outside of the classroom. Topics for collaboration might include continued digital citizenship education, ethical digital research practices, data privacy and personal information privacy skills, and public discourse.

Recommendations for Policy

Student affairs professionals are encouraged to explore what social media use – nearly ubiquitous among 18-22-year old students in college – means in terms of behavior and social expectation on campus. It is recommended that student affairs professionals further examine how social media use might intersect with student codes of conduct on campus. Institutions with acceptable use policy for technology should further incorporate social media policies that reflect the rapidly changing digital environment. Policies should be flexible and adaptable so that whenever new platforms are introduced, the policy can reflect what types of behaviors and interacts are acceptable and which are not. In addition, campuses should continue to evolve practice around what types of online behavior will be tied to campus conduct, and how that information will be allowed depending on how it is discovered. Social media use is no longer a unique aspect of student life, it is perhaps the primary means of non-physical communication amongst college students, so it is important to incorporate social media behavior guidelines and expectations *into* existing policies rather than simply adding it on as a unique set of policies.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research provided insight into the need to think critically about the emergence of digital identity as a cornerstone of individual identity formation. Rapidly changing technology and expanding methods of communication have changed the way students view who they are and how they fit into the broader context of the world. Social media has become the lens through which students view their place in the world and it is

a filter through which experiences – both lived and observed – pass through as they make meaning of their role on campus and in the world.

The use of SNS requires a shift in focus on how we understand student development theory in the context of current college students. Gonzales and Hancock (2011) stated that “social-networking sites exemplify how modern technology sometimes forces us to reconsider previously understood psychological processes” (p. 82). SNS allow students to construct their own online identity by choosing how, when and why “to indicate membership of certain subgroups, such as race, gender, sexual orientation and subcultures (e.g. music, movies)” (Mastrodicasa & Metellus, 2013). This shift in ownership of how to self-determine how the world perceives you as an individual should be considered when applying classic student development theory. Therefore, there is value in reconstructing various student development theories through the lens of social media use. For instance, research related to self-authorship (Kegan, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 2008) might be refined for the digital age in order to better understand how the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal aspects of identity are influenced by the use of social media.

As evidenced by the participants in this study, vulnerability is a key component in the identities of college men. Sorting through various digital and social contexts to understand how to define vulnerability – and to determine how and when to be vulnerable – are complicated tasks for college men. A suggested research topic is resilience among college men who are actively engaged in social media use. A rich body of literature exists on resilience (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Dweck, 2008), though the research is not necessarily focused on a defined group like college men.

Valuable insight might be gained into how the individual ego influences social media use and how vulnerability is displayed, all of which leads to how resilience is displayed.

Responses to moments of vulnerability on social media likely have an influence on other aspects of the lives of college men, and is worthy of investigation.

Additional research related to specific campus sub-groups would provide valuable insight into understanding the influence media use on all students. In particular, an analysis of the influence of social media use on the identity formation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students, ethnic groups, racially-underrepresented students, non-traditional students, etc., would prove insightful. In addition, an analysis of residential versus commuter students would provide valuable insight for campuses who are attempting to understand how to get students connected to and engaged with life on campus.

Limitations of the study

While careful consideration was given to the creation and implementation of the research study, certain factors demonstrate limitations that should be acknowledged. The research site was a selective, liberal arts institution with a religious affiliation in the upper Midwestern United States, which provided a relatively homogenous sample.

Approximately 80-percent of the participants were Caucasian (25 of the 31), and while that percentage is reflective of the population at Midwest College, the full breakdown of racial identities in the participant group does not necessarily reflect the typical make-up of college-going male students in the United States. The variety of backgrounds and cultural experiences provided a broad range of perspectives on stereotypical masculinity,

and would be an opportunity for further research. While the participants were fairly representative of the population at this particular campus, there was a limited scope of demographic diversity.

Another notable limitation was that there was no control for pre-college notions of masculinity. The population at Midwest College is over-50-percent non-Minnesotan, so there was great variability in cultural and regional influences that shaped their definitions of masculinity. In addition to pre-college perceptions of masculinity, there was no control for the extent of prior use of social media. All individuals choose to use social media slightly differently – in frequency, intent, and function - and these men were no exception. A suggestion for future research would include pre-screening for demographics and for a greater understanding of social media use.

The values and pedagogical approach at this particular institution serve as the broad foundation for understanding the meaning of the findings. As noted, Midwest College is a selective liberal arts and participants noted that there is clearly a focus on topics related to gender roles in a variety of in-classroom and out-of-classroom settings. The repeated mention of the emergence of gender fluidity as a social issue was an indication of a population more inclined to have discussed these topics with peers via formal settings. As students at a selective, private, liberal arts institution, these students were far from typical first year and senior students. The participants were high-achieving men who were involved on campus. While they experienced the world and their college experience similarly to other men, they also had a very different frame of reference for college because of the institution they attend. Many were able to articulate the privilege they perceived because of their particular experience in college.

Another notable cautionary note concerns the possible influence of the United States Presidential election. Data were collected in the fall of 2016, during the lead-up to the national election. A vast majority of participants noted an awareness of controversial topics on social media and an inclination to avoid participating in controversial or heated discussions on social media, an indication that the national election was a significant part of their social media feeds, and one to which they paid particular attention. All data were collected prior to the election, but the presence of the topic was noted in most individual interviews and in both focus group conversations.

A final limitation – and perhaps the most significant - was that I was the sole researcher and influenced the process. As the sole researcher, I created the study, conducted the interviews and focus groups, interpreted responses, co-constructed meaning with participants, and developed the emerging theory. My own experiences and perspectives on male gender identity and digital identity would be different from another researcher.

Conclusion

The 31 men who participated in this study were open, honest, vulnerable, humorous, and kind. They painted a relatively complete picture of their lives, which had a significant influence on my thinking about my own understanding of how masculinity and digital identity intersect and influence one another. The men who participated are fortunate to engage in an education that provides an opportunity to analyze, test, challenge, and reaffirm aspects of their socialized sense of masculinity. Those notions of what it means to be a man are constantly tested by peers and other external audiences –

perhaps nowhere more apparent than on social media. Establishing one's self in college while simultaneously grappling with how to establish one's self online is a complex task for young men, and the participants in this study provided insight into the value in understanding if, how, and why those identities align.

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT RECRUITMENT E-MAIL – INTERVIEW AND OBSERVATION

Dear [STUDENT],

I am recruiting male students interested in exploring and discussing perceptions of masculinity and social media use at [Midwest College]. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota and I am investigating the ways in which college men use social media and how social networking influences how men perceive and perform their masculinity.

In particular, I am interested in understanding the ways that your degree of engagement on Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram during your time at [Midwest College] has influenced your personal understanding of masculinity and your own role as a male college student.

I am inviting you to participate in a 60-minute individual interview to discuss your thoughts on social media use and masculinity on campus. In addition, you would complete a brief digital observation to discuss how and why you use social networking sites. You will receive compensation for your participation. Students who complete an individual, 60-minute interview and digital observation will receive a \$20 Amazon.com gift card. In addition, all participants in the study will have their name entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon.com gift card.

If you are willing to participate, please let me know via e-mail at potts010@umn.edu or by phone at 507-351-1042. You may also contact me if you have any further questions. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lawrence Charles Potts
University of Minnesota

STUDENT RECRUITMENT E-MAIL – FOCUS GROUPS

Dear [STUDENT],

I am recruiting male students interested in exploring and discussing perceptions of masculinity and social media use at [Midwest College]. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota and I am investigating the ways in which college men use social media and how social networking influences how men perceive and perform their masculinity.

In particular, I am interested in understanding the ways that your degree of engagement on Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram during your time at [Midwest College] has influenced your personal understanding of masculinity and your own role as a male college student.

I am inviting you to participate in a group conversation about these topics. The focus group conversation will last approximately 60 minutes. Participants in focus groups will receive a free meal while they participate in the conversation. In addition, all participants in the study will have their name entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon.com gift card.

If you are willing to participate, please let me know via e-mail at potts010@umn.edu or by phone at 507-351-1042. You may also contact me if you have any further questions. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lawrence Charles Potts
University of Minnesota

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY – PG. 1 OF 2

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Topic: The Influence of Social Media Use on Male College Students' Gender Identity and Gender Performance

You are invited to be in a research study of how the use of social media influences male college students' gender identity development and perceptions of gender performance. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a student living on campus at Midwest College. Your responses, aggregated with responses from additional respondents, will be used to identify the ways in which social media use influences male college students' gender identity and gender performance. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Charlie Potts, Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development at the University of Minnesota under the direction of advisor Dr. Darwin Hendel and co-advisor Dr. Michael Stebleton.

Background information:

The purpose of this study is to investigate how college men use social media and how social networking influences college men's understanding of their masculinity.

Procedure:

Your involvement with this research interview and/or focus group is *completely voluntary* and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time. If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to participate in at least one 45-60 minute interview or focus group to discuss your experiences with social media and your experiences as a male student at Midwest College. You will be asked about ways in which masculinity is defined and perceived on campus in addition to your use of social media. Audio from interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed. The digital audio recording and subsequent data files will be destroyed upon completion of the dissertation. All information will be kept on a password-protected laptop computer only accessible by the researcher.

Compensation:

You will receive compensation for participation in this study. Compensation will be supported by private funds from the researcher and will not be from any institutional budget. Participants in the individual initial individual interview will receive a \$20 Amazon.com gift card at the completion of the interview. Participants in focus groups will receive a meal during the focus group conversation. In addition, all participants in the study will have their name entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon.com gift card when all interviews and focus groups are completed.

**INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY – PG. 2
OF 2**

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Topic: The Influence of Social Media Use on Male College Students' Gender Identity and Gender Performance

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Participants will never be personally identified and will be given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or with Midwest College. If you decide to participate, you are free to decline answering any question(s) or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contact Information:

The researcher conducting this study is: Charlie Potts, EdD candidate. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at 507-351-1042 or potts010@umn.edu.

If you have any concerns that you feel you cannot discuss with the researcher, you may contact Dr. Darwin Hendel, Doctoral Advisor, Department of OLPD, University of Minnesota, at 612-625-0129 or hende001@umn.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the advisor, you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of parent/ guardian (if under 18 years of age): _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Opening Statement for Student Interviews

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your willingness to provide input for this project is appreciated and valued. Let's review the consent form – do you have any questions about the form? Do you have any questions about your role in the interview process today? Please sign two copies of the consent form – one for you and one that I will keep. It's important to know that your identity will remain confidential. Based on what you just read on the consent form and have been told, what is your understanding of what you are being asked to do for this study? What would you say is the purpose of this study?

This project is about understanding the influence that social media use has on how college men develop as men and how they perform their gender roles on campus. In your role as a student, I am interested in how you perceive masculinity on campus and how you and your peers use social media. I want to gain a better understanding of how you view your role as a male on campus and in the context of various social media platforms, and particularly in the context of your time at Midwest College (either as a first-year or as a senior).

I would like to start by asking a few questions about you.

1. What is your academic major or academic focus?
2. What leadership roles do you have on campus?
3. What made you decide to attend Midwest College?

Next, I would like to explore the kinds of digital social networks in which you interact.

1. Tell me about your typical daily routine with social media. How often, when and where do you access social media apps/sites?
2. Please briefly tell me more about each site you use and how you use it.
3. [First-year interview] Do you use social media differently at Midwest College than you did in high school? Tell me more about that.
4. [Senior interview] Do you use social media differently now than you have in previous years? How has your use changed over time at Midwest College?
5. Do you have your profile set to public or private?
 - a. Was that decision intentional?
6. How do you think about your audience when posting on social networking?
 - a. If so, do you think about posts differently based on when your target audience is other men? When the target audience is women?
7. Tell me about whether you intentionally post things in order to shape others' perceptions of you?

- a. Why?
8. How would people describe you in real life compared to how they'd describe you if they only interacted with you online?

Let's now talk about your perceptions of masculinity and your life as a man on social media.

1. Where and how did you learn "how to be a man"?
2. Describe for me what it means to be a man at Midwest College.
3. Describe for me how men use social media and social networking sites at Midwest College.
 - a. If you had to use 3 words to describe how your male friends at Midwest College use social media, which words would you choose?
4. If someone were to describe you, based on only what they see and interact with on social media, how would they describe you on [insert social media platform]?
 - a. Why would they describe you this way?
 - b. Do you actively work to create this perception? Why/why not?
 - c. Who are your audiences?
5. How do you interact differently with men than you do with women on social media?
6. What have you learned about yourself as a man while using social media?
7. How do you think Midwest College men interact with men differently than with women on social media?

CLOSING QUESTION: You've had a chance to talk about your own experience around gender and social media. What would you say your fellow students think about this issue?

CLOSING QUESTION: Do you have anything you'd like to add? Any additional thoughts about your experiences here?

I will not be using your real name for the final product of this research study. Is there a particular name you would like me to use for you?

APPENDIX D

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study regarding how social media use influences male gender identity development and performance among college men. I appreciate the information you provided during the interview. We are going to transition to a “digital observation” in which I will have you walk me through a typical social media session you might have.

In this observation, I want to get a sense for how you interact on social networking sites. Specifically, I’m interested in observing how you interact with fellow Midwest College students and how you think about your own gender identity when interacting with others online.

For this observation, let’s imagine you have 10-15 minutes and you decide to check your social media accounts. Take me through how you would spend your time on social media. As you do this, I will ask you questions about what you are doing.

[Repeat the following for each app/site the student uses during the observation]

1. What do you use this particular app/site for?
2. How would you describe your relationship to people you are connected to on this site?
3. If I asked others to describe you based off what they saw of you on this app/site, what would they say?
4. What types of content do you post to this site?
5. What types of content do you typically view on this site?

Thank you for letting me observe and talk to you about those apps/sites as you used them. Let’s now talk about the time you just spent on social media.

1. Do you think about posting differently based on the gender of an audience?
 - a. Do you post things differently if it involves material aimed at women? At other men?
2. Why do you follow the pages/accounts/people that you do?
3. What do those pages/accounts/people say about who you are as a man?
4. On which apps/sites do you interact most with Midwest College peers?
5. Which apps/sites are the most valuable for you in connecting with other Midwest College students? Why?

APPENDIX E

STUDENT FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus group opening statement:

Thank you taking the time to participate in this important study regarding how social media use influences male gender identity development and performance among college men. I appreciate your participation in this discussion.

My name is Charlie Potts and I'm a doctoral student in the Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development program at the University of Minnesota.

I have provided you with two copies of the Consent Form regarding your rights as a research participant. Please review it carefully and let me know if you have specific questions. We will sign both copies and each of us will retain one copy for our own records.

I want to talk with you about your experiences as a male college student and your use of social networking sites. So, I'll be asking about your usage, your reasons for use, how you think about your use, and how you all perceive that men on this campus (and college men in general) use social media.

Before we begin, let me inform you of a few things that may make our conversation more productive. Because I will be recording this conversation, it is important that you speak up and only speak one at a time so that we do not miss any of your comments.

We will only use first names here, and your names will be substituted for the pseudonyms of your choosing. I will maintain confidentiality about your role and your comments here, and I ask that you do the same by not repeating what was said or who said what when you leave this room.

During our 60 minutes together, I will ask questions and will listen to what you have to say. There will also be a portion of our time used to show you various social media posts to hear your thoughts on and interpretations of the posts. I will not participate in the discussion other than to ask questions or encourage individuals to provide input. So please feel free to respond to each other and to speak directly to others in the group.

I would like to begin recording now, so please let me know if you have any questions or concerns before we begin.

1. Please tell me your first name, your major, and where you live on campus.
2. Tell us a little bit about how you use social media:
 - a. Which apps/sites do you most frequently use? Why?
 - b. On which apps/sites do you feel most connected to others here? Why?

- c. What are the most popular apps/sites for students on campus? Why?
 - d. [Senior Group] How have you changed how you use social media sites/apps since you started college?
 - e. [First-year Group] How do you use social media differently now than how you used it in high school?
3. Tell me about what it means to be a man (in general and on this campus):
 - a. Where did you learn “how to be a man”?
 - b. What are some adjectives you would use to describe the “typical” male college student here?
 - c. [Senior Group] – How do you think about masculinity and your manhood differently as a senior than you did as a first-year student?
 - d. [First-year Group] – How do you think about masculinity and your manhood differently in college than you did in high school?
4. How do men use social media apps/sites differently than women?
 - a. What about here on campus?
 - b. If so, what are your thoughts on the differences?
5. I will now show you a series of posts from various social media platforms. Each post is a genuine post taken from the app/site. Names may be redacted to protect anonymity. I will show you one post and ask for your immediate reactions.
 - a. Post 1: Facebook
 - i. What is your reaction to what I just showed you?
 - ii. What does this say about the men who posted this?
 - iii. Would you post something like this? Why or why not?
 - iv. Would a man on this campus post something like this?
 - v. Does this particular social networking app/site influence the way you think about this post?
 - b. Post 2: Twitter
 - i. What is your reaction to what I just showed you?
 - ii. What does this say about the men who posted this?
 - iii. Would you post something like this? Why or why not?
 - iv. Would a man on this campus post something like this?
 - v. Does this particular social networking app/site influence the way you think about this post?
 - c. Post 3: Snapchat
 - i. What is your reaction to what I just showed you?
 - ii. What does this say about the men who posted this?
 - iii. Would you post something like this? Why or why not?
 - iv. Would a man on this campus post something like this?

- v. Does this particular social networking app/site influence the way you think about this post?
 - d. Post 4: Instagram
 - i. What is your reaction to what I just showed you?
 - ii. What does this say about the men who posted this?
 - iii. Would you post something like this? Why or why not?
 - iv. Would a man on this campus post something like this?
 - v. Does this particular social networking app/site influence the way you think about this post?
- 6. Do certain apps/sites have reputations at Midwest College? Or are assumptions made about certain apps/sites on campus?
 - a. How do those reputations or assumptions about specific apps/sites influence how you behave on those apps/sites?
- 7. If you had to choose a message you would send to college men about using social media apps/sites, what would you say?
- 8. Any closing thoughts you would like to share with me about your experience as a man on campus and/or your experiences with social media apps/sites?
- 9. Any closing thoughts or questions about your experience together during the last 60 minutes?

Thank you again for taking the time to participate in this discussion. You will all be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon.com gift card.

A reminder that all information was recorded during this session. I will maintain confidentiality for what was said during this conversation and I ask that you do the same. All transcripts and recordings from this session will be destroyed at the completion of the research project.

APPENDIX F

IMAGES FROM FOCUS GROUP CONVERSATIONS

Facebook Image



Twitter Image



Snapchat Image



Instagram Image

